

MONUMENTAL NOVELS

Monumental Novels in a Global and Digital Age

Monumentale romans
in tijden van globalisering en digitalisering

(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan de Universiteit Utrecht op
gezag van de rector magnificus, prof.dr. G.J. van der Zwaan, ingevolge
het besluit van het college voor promoties in het openbaar te verdedigen
op vrijdag 27 november 2015 des middags te 12.45 uur

door
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geboren op 10 oktober 1984
te Oss

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'Things are going to slide, slide in all directions
 Won't be nothing
 Nothing you can measure anymore
The blizzard, the blizzard of the world
 has crossed the threshold
 and it has overturned
 the order of the soul'

Leonard Cohen, *The Future*

Voor opa Jan

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Acknowledgements

This book came about in collaboration with a veritable dream team of supervisors and advisers. So here goes.

There is no way of expressing the full extent of my gratitude to Professor Kiene Brillenburg Wurth. It is she who conceived of this amazing project, 'Back to the Book,' and who saw a potential in me when I walked into her classroom many moons ago as a defiant and pierced adolescent. Since then, she has consistently spurred me on to write better and think deeper. Being supervised by her was an honor but also a challenge, for Professor Brillenburg Wurth has ten original ideas a minute and thinks even faster than she reads. Coupled with her overwhelming knowledge of art, literature, philosophy, and media, trying to keep up with her for four years was exhausting yet exhilarating. I continue to be inspired by her generosity, her enthusiasm and energy, her originality, and creativity. Kiene, I know you always tell me that multiple adjectives lead to a depletion of meaning, but in describing you, I need an interminable supply. I am grateful for everything you have done for me and hope to work with you again in the future.

I thank my second promotor, Professor Ernst van Alphen, for sharing his exceptional knowledge on archival theory and narrativity. Professor van Alphen understood where this dissertation was headed way before I could explicitly voice my thesis. Reading and re-reading his manuscript for *Staging the Archive* (2015) played a vital role in connecting the different threads of my own research. My project is thoroughly indebted to his investigations of the shift from narrative to archival principles in literature and the visual arts, and I share his enthusiasm for this fascinating field of research that is currently opening up.

With her expertise in the fields of materiality, digital culture, and the contemporary novel, Professor Yra van Dijk's supervision has proved invaluable. I cordially thank Professor van Dijk for her good counsel, much-needed structuring suggestions, and ready encouragement. My research has especially benefited from her down-to-earth perspective

on thesis-writing ('this is just a test, not your magnum opus') and her healthy skepticism towards everything that is presented as 'new' in literature and media.

In addition to this awe-inspiring team of supervisors, I was blessed with a number of expert advisors. This dissertation would have been all the poorer (and not just grammatically) had it not been for the unrelenting advice, feedback, and encouragement from my friend and colleague, Jason D'Aoust. Dr. D'Aoust's knowledge of literature, music, and digital media is only surpassed by his inhuman patience with my convoluted sentences and the excellent quality of his martinis. Thank you for sharing your ideas, your time, and your Wagner DVDs. Dr. Jessica Pressman has been an influential presence overseas throughout this research period, kindly offering her guidance, detailed comments, and critical readings of my chapters. I thank Dr. David Schmid for his helpful feedback on my pieces on Vollmann and Danielewski, and Professor Ann Rigney for generously sharing her expertise on memorial culture. Besides Dr. Schmid and Professor Rigney, I am indebted to the other members of the reading committee—Professor Jan Baetens, Professor Rosemarie Buikema, and Professor David Pascoe—for their interest in, and careful reading of, my work.

These four years would have been a much more sober affair without the constant companionship of my colleague Sara Rosa Espi, who soon became my close friend. From organizing a conference to publishing and lecturing, we experienced it all together. Sara, thank you for the hours of conversation, coffee, beer, and kaasstengels we shared, and for your humor, intelligence, and support. I hope we will be able to teach more classes together in the future: from Aristotle to Zadie Smith. I also thank Sara and my awesome friend Kristel Peters for some spirited paranymphe.

I want to express my gratitude to the talented and inspiring staff at Utrecht University's Department of Comparative Literature for making me feel welcome and enthusiastically discussing matters of teaching and research: Frank Brandsma, Kári Driscoll, Tom Idema, Birgit Kaiser, Susanne Knittel, Kila van der Starre, and all the others. A special thanks to Simone Veld from the Graduate School of Humanities and Rianne Giethoorn from ICON for their kindness and support. Many thanks go to the international group of scholars who participated to make our research group's 2012 conference *Book Presence in Utrecht* such a great success. I am grateful to Professor John Hamilton for the opportunity to stay at Harvard University as a visiting researcher in 2013, and to his colleagues at the Comparative Literature department for welcoming me and offering me a splendid environment for further developing my ideas for this research. The students of 'Recent Literature: From the Miniature to the Monumental' (2014) inspired me with their imaginative writings and fierce debates on Roberto Bolaño's *2666*. I thank the participants

in the panel on William Vollmann at the NeMLA 2015 convention in Toronto for sharing their work and for a thought-provoking discussion about this elusive author. I thank Bill Vollmann himself for generously corresponding with me by hand-written mail. Cheers to Martijn Neggers for the monumental design of this book.

Ik wil graag in het Nederlands mijn lieve gezin bedanken voor alle steun, gezelligheid en afleiding: Mama, Michelle en Rob, Jimmy en Andrea. Hetzelfde geldt voor mijn plusfamilie: Marion 'Het Krat', Willem 'Ad', Linda 'Coby' en Thijs 'Gerrit'. Bedankt dat jullie Deb-Deb in jullie midden hebben opgenomen.

Bart, koekerd, liefde van m'n leven: zonder jou waren de afgelopen vier jaren een stuk saaier geweest.

Introduction

The Monumental is Now

Is it not by risking nothing, by never aiming high, that a writer of low or middling powers keeps generally clear of faults and secure of blame? Whereas the loftier walks of literature are by their very loftiness perilous?

—Longinus, *On the Sublime*¹

Overambitious projects may be objectionable in many fields, but not in literature. Literature remains alive only if we set ourselves immeasurable goals, far beyond all hope of achievement.

—Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*²

Recently, the author Philip Roth has predicted that the ‘screen’ technologies of computer and television condition our brains to the point where the old “single-focus requirement,” the devout mode of concentration needed for slowly reading a book, will become an “elegiac exercise” (qtd. in Colman 2011). V.S. Naipaul has expressed his loss of faith in the novel when it comes to answering to our larger global political situation, and argues that “the world cannot be contained in the novel” (2003: 180). Roth and Naipaul certainly do not stand alone in their gloomy outlooks. In the last decades, many critics and authors have diagnosed the precarious health, or even the ‘death,’ of the novel (Kernan 1990; Compagnon 2000; Marx 2005; Millet 2007; Todorov 2007; Iyer 2011; Self 2014; McCarthy 2015). These critics often blame new

1 (1890: XXXIII: 2)

2 (1988: 112)

media for the novel's alleged demise. Some, like Roth, have argued novels cannot compete with the more exciting technologies of 'screen media' (see also Franzen 1996). Others believe that shorter textual forms, such as Tweets and the internet's flashy, distracting overload of textual and visual fragments, are conditioning readers to a point where our shortened attention spans will soon make it impossible to read extended prose narratives (Frand 2000; Birkerts 2006; Woolf 2007; Carr 2010; Center for the Digital Future 2012). Is the novel becoming an elite form for a small cult of readers, as Roth predicts?

A closer look at the actual production and dissemination of novels and books during this period is enough to refute these apocalyptic predictions. There is no reason to expect the demise of the novel. On the contrary: these last decades have witnessed the publication of such exceedingly large novels as David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), Roberto Bolaño's *2666* (2004), Péter Nádas's *Parallel Stories* (2005), Haruki Murakami's *1Q84* (2009), and Eleanor Catton's *The Luminaries* (2013). In addition, under the influence of sophisticated forms like narratively complex TV-series and the newfound prestige of graphic novels and computer games, we are presently witnessing a revival of the serialized novel as an innovative form, shorn of its long-standing association with 'low-brow' culture. Authors like William T. Vollmann and Mark Z. Danielewski have applied themselves to extended series of literary novels that take decades to write and thus demand exceptional stamina from authors and readers alike.

How should we interpret this dedication to 'big books' and long narratives, and indeed the ambition to transform an 'old' medium to unprecedented scopes and volumes, just when the medium was expected to become obsolete? Indeed, the prevalence of an aesthetic of monumentality in literature seems anachronistic. After the advent of postmodernism's insistence on partiality and historicity and Jean-François Lyotard's announcement of the end of the 'grand narratives' (1984), after the slice-of-life narratives of the 1950s, the trend of the 'local' and neorealism in the 1970s, and the popularity of short fiction in the 1980s (see Karl 1983: 180), who would have expected the 1000-page novel to prosper in the third millennium?³ Had World War II not

3 In literary aesthetics, there is a long-standing tradition of unease with overly long or excessive textual forms. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle famously argued against the drawn-out plot for the tragedy, because the spectator would not be able to synthesize and remember the story (1986: 27). Immanuel Kant, too, in his *Critique of Judgment*, proposed that beauty resides in proportion, harmony, and demarcation—in the viewer's ability to perceive the contours of an object (1981: §23). The art critic Bertram Jessup argued that 'over-crowding' or 'over-loading' in art leads to perceptual discomfort and disinterest (1950: 34-5). And Pierre Bourdieu (1987) insisted on the primacy of manner over matter, of quality over quantity, when it comes to literature's symbolic (as opposed to economic) capital (xxviii; xxix). These traditional biases against the excessive form linger in literary criticism.

taught us to be skeptical of the sweeping, grand monumental gestures of the nineteenth century, which became suspect aesthetically because of their association with totalitarianism? What social and technological factors contribute to this new emphasis on magnitude—in scope, length, weight, and bulk?

If we want to find answers to these questions, we should venture in the direction of the novel's continuous death and rebirth. In the meantime, Roth and Naipaul have by no means stopped writing novels in the wake of their apocalyptic pronouncements on the future of the art form. The death of the novel, this suggests, is not to be taken at face value. On the contrary: such pronouncements are as old as the novel itself. Almost every notable technological and social shift in the past two centuries has led to anxieties about the future of the novel. The novel was believed to in 'competition' for an audience with the rise of photography, the phonograph and cinema (Van Dijk 2014: 4; Elliott 2003; Fitzpatrick 2006). The alleged 'threat' that these once-emerging technologies exerted, even when it never truly jeopardized the novel, did alter the status of literary texts, as well as their form and content (Baetens et al. 2013: 141-42). Time and again the novel survives its own 'death' by adapting to these changes. The present moment, marked by globalization, digitalization, and the rise of 'big data,' is no exception to this rule. In this thesis I argue that one way in which the novel survives in the hyper-connected and globalized present is by reinventing itself as a *monumental* novel. It does so in a dialogue with changes in media and technology (digitalization, big data, quantification) and the ethical challenges of globalization.

Towards a definition

I will analyze this monumentality in the works of Roberto Bolaño, Karl Ove Knausgård, William T. Vollmann, and Mark Z. Danielewski. Before I do so, however, I will first propose a definition of the term. What could 'monumental' mean when applied to the contemporary novel? An attempt to answer this question is obstructed by the fact that 'monumental' as an attribute seems never to be in need of definition, let alone critical examination.

the sheer complexity, monumental ambition, and over-totalizing novelistic drive of 2666 ... Wolf Hall is a monumental achievement on every level. ... Brothers is a monumental spectacle and a fascinating vision of an extraordinary place and time. ... Vollmann legt mit diesem Monumentalroman eine ausufernde und dennoch wohldurchdachte Reflexion über das europäische Jahrhundert vor. ... In his most monumental novel, Thomas Pynchon casts a savage, postmodern eye over contemporary life. ... his last monumental and bewildering

work *Zwerm* ... David Mitchell's *Monumental* novel comes to the big screen with a huge cast of well known faces playing multiple roles in different time periods. ... *Das Werk Lewinskys* ist monumental, wie es sich für Familienchroniken gehört, denn nichts anderes wird hier erzählt. ... Murakami's *Monumental New Masterpiece* ... *Les Bienveillantes* est un livre si monumental, et si étrange, qu'il donne l'impression d'être l'oeuvre d'une vie. ... De Vlaamse auteur Paul Verhaeghen is voor zijn monumentale roman *Omega Minor* bekroond met de prestigieuze *Independent Foreign Fiction Prize*. ... Adam Levin has [written] a novel that is muscular and exuberant, troubling and empathetic, monumental, breakneck, romantic, and unforgettable. ... Lehane es autor de *Cualquier otro día*, una monumental novela ambientada en el Boston de la Huelga de la Policía de 1919 ... Zadie Smith wrote her monumental *White Teeth* when she was just twenty five. ... Jonathan Franzen's monumental tragicomedy of depressive love ...¹

As evidenced by the above-quoted fragments from reviews and critical articles, the expression 'monumental novel' is somewhat of a buzz word. In older literature it is a commonplace, most notably in reference to the nineteenth-century works of canonical authors like Tolstoi, Zola or Stendhal. Moreover, the adjective is currently over-used in reviews of the latest literary sensations.⁴ But because of its seemingly self-evident nature, the term has rarely been given substance. As Alexander Rehding suggests in his book on monumental music of the nineteenth century, it is hard to move beyond stating "the obvious, bare observation that monumentality is somehow about big gestures and grand effects" (2009: 4). And yet, that is exactly what I am working towards in this introduction.

A working definition of the monumental should combine a notion of bigness and lasting greatness with an emphasis on commemorative value. How do the material dimensions of such novels and their expansive scope relate to their workings as vehicles of cultural memory? How does the monumental bigness of these works relate to their commemorative dimension of preserving the novel, literature, or the book for future generations?

Effects of the monumental are, first, the direct result of *material*

4 As evidenced by Google's Ngram for the search term 'monumental novel,' to which references have peaked dramatically since the 1990s:

https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=monumental+novel&year_start=1800&year_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cmonumental%20novel%3B%2Cc0

characteristics of weight, length, bulk, size, and number of pages. But size is not all that monumentality entails. The material dimensions of these texts and their carriers are expected to metonymically point to what is 'inside' them. We assume that monumental novels are large-scale both literally and materially, because they are in narrative scope and themes as well. The books' outer perimeters raise expectations with respect to their quantitative range of subjects, the 'amount' of geography and history amassed in the narration, the ground they cover, or their conceptual magnitude.

Monumentality as a metonym for grandness in scope in turn gives rise to monumentality as a value judgment and an instrument of distinction. The author's ambition of 'conquering' time and space renders his or her novels weighty in the figural sense of being important enough to preserve. We often implicitly assume a correlation between quantity and quality that Bertram E. Jessup has called "aesthetic size," which explains why we "speak with evaluative intent of a large canvas, a big building, a long poem, a major composition and a sustained performance" (1950: 31). In everyday language we forge this correlation habitually, as terms like "great," "grand(iose)" and "magnificent" illustrate.

In the marketing of books and in literary criticism, therefore, monumentality is appropriated as one of the latest marketing strategies of the "literary-value industry" that produces the reputations and status positions of authors and their works and situates them on various scales of merit (English and Frow 2006: 45).⁵ While big books are of all times and places, monumentality is currently foregrounded as a literary trend, in contrast to a culture of participatory media and remix. It plays into a nostalgic longing for canonicity and for posterity while it questions the staying power of literature. We can only arrive at an understanding of monumentality in the contemporary novel when we take into account its other dimension besides volume: that of preservation and commemoration. Aimed at stability, a monument inadvertently suggests a certain vulnerability.

A recent example that clearly brings out this ambiguous stance toward posterity is the 'Future Library Project.' This project consists of a hundred books that will be placed in a time capsule that remains unopened until 2114. Once a year, a writer will be invited to contribute a new text that none of her or his contemporaries are allowed to read. The organizers first planted 1,000 trees in a town outside of Oslo, in order to supply the paper for the books over a century. For this purpose, a printing press will

5 That this strategy seems to work, and that the monumental sells, is underwritten by the current popularity of a line of merchandise ranging from tote bags to mugs and from notebooks to t-shirts with the text 'I like big books and I cannot lie'. See for an example: <<http://www.savannahbay.nl/shop/cadeautjes-overig/overig-1/tas-i-like-big-books-and-i-can-not-lie.html?&sl=nl>>

also be installed to ensure that these texts can still be printed in paper form (in case the technology is phased out in the meantime). Margaret Atwood, one of the elected writers, has commented on the Future Library Project that

It's very optimistic to believe, . . . that there will be people in 100 years, that those people will still be reading, . . . and that we'll be able to communicate across time, which is what any book is in any case – it's always a communication across space and time. This one is just a little bit longer. (in Novak 2014)

Atwood's comment brings to the fore an ambivalent take on longevity, as well as a general logic of tautology that underlies monumentality. By suggesting that certain literary works are memorable enough to be consigned to posterity, the adjective 'monumental,' when applied to contemporary works, becomes a vehicle for speculation about the future of literature. At the same time, it underwrites a sense of insecurity as to the novel's afterlife. The novel as monument is intended as a bulwark against *its own death*, a monument to the genre itself.

The current situation bears striking resemblance to that of the nineteenth century, when, amid profound societal and technological changes and the emergence of modern cities, nations sought to define themselves through monuments that would ensure cultural permanence. The nineteenth-century monument defined the nation's relation to the past and its anticipated survival and continuity in the face of these changes and the unpredictable future. In the field of letters, the monumentalization of authors and their works sprung from a strange dichotomy described by Michael Garval as a "keen awareness of the vagaries of change existing alongside an equally powerful dream of purposefulness, solidity, and immutability – of an imagined, ideal world of letters that never was, and never would be" (2003: 91). Thus, as Richard Wagner argued, a monumental style was born out of disaffection with the fashionable, itself turned into fashion (1872: 296).⁶

When we compare this assessment of nineteenth-century monumentality to the monumental novels by authors like Vollmann, Danielewski, Knausgård, and Bolaño, they seem to symptomize a similar desire for permanence in the face of rapid cultural change. In

6 In this letter, Wagner himself emphatically turned away from this form of monumentality, which he deemed as frivolous and as hostile to the present as the fashionable itself: "Ein absoluter Respekt vor dem Monumentalen ist gar nicht denkbar: er kann sich in Wahrheit nur auf eine ästhetische Abneigung gegen eine widerliche und unbefriedigende Gegenwart stützen. . . die höchste Bethätigung dieses Eifers kann am Ende nur darin bestehen, daß das Monumentale selbst zur Mode gemacht wird, wie dieß in Wahrheit heut' zu Tage der Fall ist." (296)

the first chapter of this thesis, I argue that a foregrounding of the novel's monumental potential today can be read analogously to the nineteenth century, in the face of transformations in the media-landscape (e.g. the popularity of shorter forms of writing such as tweets, anxieties about attention spans, the shift from narrative to database, telling-as-counting), and the shift toward a globalized, 'networked' world. While selling 'the new,' the monumental novel as a strategy of literary value-production plays into a nostalgic longing for the classic, for the novel as a transcendent artifact, in a cultural climate where the arrival of new 'classics' is all but safeguarded.

Old and new media

In the three chapters that follow the first, I show that, even (or especially) when in manifest opposition to these social and technological transformations, the novels under study are marked by the profound influence of these same developments. I explore how these literary objects fit into a larger development of increasing interest in the topic of size and scale in the humanities and social sciences, as influenced by digitalization.

One of the developments beginning to exert a profound effect on novels is the rise of 'big data' (Aiden and Michel 2013; Anderson 2008; Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013). 'Big data' denotes today's possibilities of processing and transmitting unprecedented amounts (petabytes) of data, without the need to sample ('N=all'). This shift to an all-inclusive scope has consequences for representational strategies in literature. In the computer age, as media theorist Lev Manovich already knew in 2001, the database replaces narrative as our primary means of meaning-making (219). Other than the narrative plot, the structure of the database is characterized by non-causality and lack of closure, a potentially endless addition of elements. Narrative is the outcome of a process of selection: for every element (character, event), another element could have been chosen. The database, according to Manovich, is less discriminatory and more inclusive (231). How does this new cultural emphasis on quantification and scale affect the ways in which we make sense of the world around us and our own lives? How does it transform the role of literature and of narrativity in society?

This thesis will show that, rather than being in competition with each other (Manovich 2001: 225; Folsom 2007: 1577), narrative and database are related in terms of inspiration and cross-fertilization (Veel 2011; Hayles 2007; Vesna 2008). Bound between the covers of the material book but influenced by digital media's quantitative strategies of representation, the objects of study are hybrids between narrative and database, causality (one thing *because of* another) and seriality (one thing *after* another), inclusivity and selection.

That 'analog' literature is currently being transformed under the

influence of digitalization does not mean, however, that the quantitative and serial forms in these novels are entirely new or unprecedented. This study builds on the premise that the strategies of scale, seriality, and quantification at work in these novels should be placed in their proper media-historical tradition, and understood as *reinventions* of older forms. The contemporary serial novel is a continuation of the nineteenth-century serialized novel or *feuilleton* (Law 2000; Mussell 2012); the database narrative expands late medieval annals and chronicles (White 1980; Ernst 2013; Simanowski 2012). The renewed attention to book materiality and the spatial features of the codex in works by Vollmann and Danielewski goes back to the art of illuminated manuscripts and of the visual-textual innovations by authors like William Blake and Stéphane Mallarmé (Arnar 2011; Drucker 1995; Kirschenbaum 2008). By thus incorporating 'the new' (e.g. telling-as-counting, database structures, quantification), they simultaneously remind us of, and revalue, older aesthetic strategies (e.g. the mathematical sublime, the chronicle, digression). Today's monumental novels enter into a dialogue with new media and render these older representational practices newly relevant.

The monumental novel thus reflects on, and re-thinks, the literary by updating these older practices of representation in interaction with the present. Read together, the works of Bolaño, Vollmann, Danielewski, and Knausgård will provide valuable insights in how the novel reinvents itself as monumental today vis-à-vis a changing media-scape and changing perspectives of the world (especially in terms of scale). This will allow us to see how the novel survives, adapting to social and technological transformations and thus always living on past its own predicted expiration date.

The novel

Why the novel, and why today? There are several reasons why I focus on the novel, and, in order to understand these in more depth, it is relevant to briefly consider the properties of this genre, and ask why it facilitates an investigation into the monumental. The first reason stems from the novel's ability to transform itself. From José Ortega y Gasset (1925) to Georg Lukács (1971) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1988), theorists of the novel have tended to agree on hybridity and heterogeneity as foremost characteristics of the genre: an ability to include multiple codes and a variety of cultural materials. We need only consider such diverse titles as Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Rabelais's *Gargantua* and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, to note that the novel is far from a homogeneous category with fixed characteristics. The novel can reinvent itself, as Bakhtin has written, because of its openness, its constant interaction with the present, changing life-world (2008; 2008a). Adapting to the socio-cultural and

technological structures surrounding it, the novel is able to project itself beyond its own apprehended death time after time.

However, the novel does more than adapt to technocultural changes. It lends itself to a preoccupation with the investigation of the strategies and modes of representation that it 'borrows' from other media and cultural practices. By incorporating these combined strategies and modes of representation within the covers of the book and the linearity of narrative, the novel furthermore adds a level of selection and critical evaluation. The novel is an art form that can reflect on the practices of representation it incorporates. Novels can defamiliarize and bring to our attention the very developments that allegedly 'threaten' the genre's cultural relevance. As I argue in the first chapter, the monumental novel stresses its own uniqueness and difference with respect to the engulfing flow of information in society, and underscores its own ability to select and retain what is valuable and eliminate what is not. Thus, authors continuously revalue and reevaluate the aesthetic possibilities of the book-bound novel in a dialectical relation with the evolving present.

The constant renewal of the genre, along with its continued investigation of, and reflection on, representational modes in other media and culture at large, facilitates the creation of a space which, in turn, allows for the present study's exploration of monumentality. In what ways does the novel currently reinvent itself as monumental in dialogue with the digital, yet without being subsumed under its logic? How does the novel, by foregrounding its own monumental potential, adapt to social, cultural and technological changes and, at the same time, stress its unique affordances? The openness of the novelistic genre with respect to other media and cultural practices make it particularly well suited to address issues of scale and preservation as they surface today in debates regarding digitalization, big data, and globalization. Although a preoccupation with size and scale in contemporary culture is increasingly pervasive in other media and cultural fields as well, and although these are currently gaining importance as topics of investigation in the humanities and social sciences at large (see Clarke and Wittenberg 2016), the novel's hybrid form and potential for self-reflexivity make it especially useful for this type of investigation. These characteristics will help me to emphasize the historical perspective in which a contemporary monumentality should be situated, and will allow me to reunite the topic of size and scale with that other temporal dimension of the monument: preservation and commemoration.

The corpus

At first sight, the works on which this study focuses (with the exception of Danielewski's *Only Revolutions*) might seem conventional in their appearance and book-bound materiality. When considered together, however, they offer a new perspective on the novel's monumental

potential and its place in a larger media ecology.

The four novelists seem to have little or nothing in common, apart from media stardom or -notoriety. Roberto Bolaño (1953-2003) was a Chilean writer who in recent years has achieved posthumous fame in the English-speaking world. William T. Vollmann (1959-) is an American author and journalist whose notoriously dangerous lifestyle has brought him under the attention of the FBI. Mark Z. Danielewski (1966-) achieved a cult status with his debut *House of Leaves* (2000), and boasts a committed group of fans who discuss his work in online forums. Last in this list is the Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgård (1968-). His fictional autobiography in six volumes has recently caused great scandal by exposing in shocking detail the private lives of his friends and family, and by choosing a title which in German translates to *Mein Kampf*, the title of Hitler's autobiographical manifesto.

Yet, in many respects, they could not be further apart. Bolaño's novels are hybrid in their combination of different genres and styles, from detective fiction to the *Bildungsroman* and from the surrealist to the satirical. Vollmann's books are hybrids between journalistic writing and literary prose, exploring the limits between fact and fiction, with a conscientious eye for historical detail. Knausgård focuses on the intimate and intensely personal details of his own private life, and Danielewski incorporates the materiality of the book and the page in innovative ways to stress what is special about books.

A parallel emerges, however, when we consider the quantitative aspect, the way these authors produce 'monumental effects' in size, scope, and commemorative focus. From the bare material fact of their total output, in volume, weight, or stacks of pages, it becomes immediately clear that these four writers have put great effort in creating an *oeuvre*. Thus Bolaño, on the brink of his death from liver disease in 2003, strove to leave posterity "the fattest novel in the world" (Valdes 2009: 12). The result is his magnum opus 2666, posthumously published in 2004. Fattest novel or not, Bolaño is quantitatively surpassed in his production rate by Vollmann. As an alleged result of a traumatic experience in his youth (his sister drowned because young William, immersed in a book, was not paying attention), the author has been under a self-imposed imperative to register "everything." Consequently, he has published twenty-four books since 1987. Knausgård displays a similar unstoppable compulsion to write. After having written two award-winning novels, he published the first volume of *Min Kamp (My Struggle)*, a total of six autobiographical novels that were published between 2009 and 2011. His writing stands out for its excessive detail, and critics have called him a Norwegian Proust (De la Durantaye 2013). And Danielewski manages to incorporate an overload of text in his works that seem to come forth from "a frenzy of graphomania" (Hayles 2012: 16). As a case in point, he has recently published the first, 880-page volume of a 27-part series of

novels.

Since the extraordinary volume of the collected works of these authors is a direct consequence of their totalizing rather than synecdochal use of narrative strategies, only their oeuvres in their entirety are representative of their monumentality. It is impossible to give one short rendition of a passage from the works of these writers to elucidate at once what their monumental strategies amount to, precisely because monumentality entails most importantly accumulation, quantity, and scale—*numbers*. Bolaño's *2666* counts 1128 pages (893 in the English translation). Since 1976, he has published a total of twenty-four volumes, counting his poetry, story collections, novellas, and novels, fifteen of which have been translated to English, five posthumously. Knausgård's *Min Kamp* series amounts to over 3500 pages and has sold 450,000 copies in his homeland. An impressive feat, as only five million people live in Norway. Half of Vollmann's books are 600 pages or longer. Publishing rights of the first volume were sold to fifteen different countries and the grand total of his output tops 10,000 pages. His novel *Europe Central* is accompanied by 748 endnotes. And Danielewski's projected 27-part series *The Familiar* will count a grand total of 21,000 pages. Monumentally big, monumentally popular, monumentally prolific.⁷

Already from this brief overview, one realizes how the effects of monumentality are, in the first instance, a direct correlate of the material characteristics of the oeuvre: the size, bulk, length, and weight of these novels make them 'weighty' in a figural sense, which immediately and sensorially underwrites their status as 'instant classics'. As the direct cause of these material and quantitative aspects, monumentality entails the ambition to be comprehensive in time and place: to be all-encompassing in geographical space and in thematic range, as well as never-ending in narration. As I explain in the first chapter, the monumental ambitions of conquering time and space manifest themselves more specifically in a number of devices and structural principles of narration, such as lists, the anaphoric singulative mode of frequency, totalization, expansion, and digression and regression (or 'interminability'). These strategies are not new—digression and totalization derive from the epic, and the anaphoric singulative mode at least goes back to Cervantes' *Don Quixote*

7 Literary critics and reviewers have not failed to notice the monumental quality of the works of these authors. *2666* has been considered "la más monumental de [Bolaño's] obras" (Herralde 2005: 95); Vollmann's *Europe Central* has been called "ein Monumentalroman" (Halfmann 2013); Danielewski's *The Familiar* "takes place all over the world," and its "disparate narratives will collide in a monumental way as the series continues" (Clark 2015); and one reviewer remarked on the third book from Knausgård's *My Struggle* series (*Boyhood Island*, 2014 [2009]) that "by the book's end, memory has become monumental, mythic" (O'Rourke 2014). However, the notion of monumentality here always remains undefined and un-theorized. As I pointed out above, it is rather used as a buzz word denoting the 'big, ambitious' works of literature.

(1605)—but I am convinced that they obtain a new urgency today when placed in an interpretive framework of the digital and the global.

The reasons for my selection of these particular authors for the present study, however, are more complex than a consideration of the size of their oeuvres, and I should briefly address them here in order to elucidate the precise nature of the monumentality that I seek to bring across. First, I specifically focus on literary novels and exclude genre fiction from my corpus. The reason I do this is that there is a close connection between big or 'maximalist' cultural forms and consumerism, which explains the commercial success of authors like Frederick Forsyth, John Grisham and Dan Brown (Ercolino 2014: 25). Authors of political potboilers, fantasy fiction, and the historical novel are often remarkably prolific, and their works are large-scale almost by default. An analysis of their specific monumental affordances would remain firmly within the bounds of genre studies, and would not be as productive when it comes to understanding the status quo of literature vis-à-vis a changing society and media ecology.

A second reason, the novels I have selected reveal a friction between more traditionally 'novelistic' strategies of representation on the one hand, and modes of representation derived from new media on the other. Had monumentality in scope and size been my sole criterion of selection, this study would have included such works as Haruki Murakami's *1Q84* (2009), Eleanor Catton's *The Luminaries* (2013) and David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004). These are novels just as large materially and in scope of reference, and easily as complex in terms of plot construction. In contrast to the works I study, however, they are marked by structures that in the end 'come together' in a final synthesis that does not leave a tension between heterogeneous structures of representation like those of narrative and database. The many stories included in these novels, in the end reunite seamlessly into an organic whole.

By contrast, in the works of Vollmann, Danielewski, Bolaño, and Knausgård the organizing principles of narrative and database enter in a productive tension within the book-bound novel and leave it open-ended. This formal, structural friction is coupled with a thematic reflection on ongoing issues concerning our current global and digital 'network culture'. Under the influence of this present network culture, these novels include expanding networks of reference. As not all is 'new' about this present moment, they refer back to older strategies of representation (such as chronicles, lists, and enumerations) and make these newly relevant. The authors I focus on reevaluate, and revalue, the possibilities of the book-bound novel in a dynamic interaction with new media.

This consideration of the 'old' in conjunction with the new, finally, adds an important level of meaning to my case studies. The works that I analyze, I will argue, have certain (problematic) neoromantic

characteristics in common. As I discuss at more length in the first chapter, their authors are presented, and present themselves, as prototypical Romantic heroes who suffer for their art, do not steer clear of risk, and manifestly oppose the commercial industry surrounding literature. Vollmann, most notably, has repeatedly expressed a Romantic stance towards modern technologies: he does not own a cell phone or a computer, disdains television, the Internet, and most other contemporary media (McCaffery 2004: xxxii). In the author's FBI file, which he revealed in an 2013 essay in *Harper's Magazine*, "Life as a Terrorist," his "anti-progress, anti-industrialist" tendencies are mentioned as reasons for the FBI's surveillance of the author on suspicion of being the Unabomber.⁸ Knausgård resents the modern predicament of being constantly "exported elsewhere," and presents his project of writing "literature of the highest quality" (2013: 459) as a turning-away from a world marked by media and commercialism. In his last novel he compares himself to Adolf Hitler on grounds of his solitary constitution and artistic aspirations. Danielewski, though less of a Romantic and most attuned to the present moment, wants to investigate in his work what is special about the book in relation to the Internet, what books do that digital media cannot do (Cottrell 2011). In Bolaño's case, he is rumored to have literally died for his art by delaying a liver transplant in order to finish his novel.

At the same time, these authors express an awareness of the belatedness of their Romantic ideals and their clash with the world they live in. Knausgård expresses this duality in *My Struggle*.

The ideas I had nurtured, and which had been such a natural part of me that I didn't even realise they were ideas, and accordingly had never articulated, only felt, but which nonetheless had had a controlling influence over me, were Romanticism in its purest form, in other words antiquated. My notion that art was the place where the flames of truth and beauty burned, the last remaining place where life could show its true face, was crazy. But now and then this notion broke through, not as a thought, for it could be argued out of existence, but as a feeling. I knew with my whole being that the notion was a lie, that I was deceiving myself. (2013: 127-28)⁹

⁸ In this essay Vollmann recounts how he read his FBI file, learning that he was suspect S-2047 in the Unabomber investigation of the 1990s. From the file: "Individuals this bright are capable of most anything, including deluding detection for 17 years" and "By all intents, Vollmann is exceedingly intelligent and possessed with an enormous ego" (See Vollmann 2013).

⁹ To give one more example, Bolaño, when asked in an interview asked why his

These neoromantic tendencies prove resilient and hard to shake off. They foster 'archival' representations of women as a quest to preserve otherness, which I situate in the tradition of *das Ewig-Weibliche* (see Goethe 1808). They express a longing for unity and transcendence, their expressions of *Sehnsucht* and an anachronistic sense of faith in the power of literature to produce 'everlasting' greatness. In negotiating an awareness of belatedness and a drive to take the novel to monumental heights, these authors balance naiveté and cynicism. Vollmann cannot write the new *War and Peace* and is aware of that, but it does not stop him from trying. Knausgård, his critical reception notwithstanding, is no Marcel Proust, and Bolaño's *2666*, as I will show, is a long cry from *Moby-Dick*, as it should be. My chosen concept of 'monumentality' for this study captures this retro-artistic dimension. Besides referring to bigness and preservation, monumentality bears resonations of belatedness, militarism, and masculinity (Huysen 1996: 189-90; Young 1992).

On a related note, the reader will notice that I have selected only male authors. This is a conscious decision. As I argue at more length in chapter one, the monumental is decisively coded along gender lines. The totalizing ambition of 'conquering time and space' in the novel has for ages been connoted with masculinity and patriarchy, as terms like 'masterpiece' and 'masterwork' underscore. The association in Western thought of masculinity with big, ambitious works on the one hand, and the feminine with small, personal, ephemeral forms of writing on the other, is still felt in literary criticism and production today (see Miller 2009).¹⁰ I have chosen not to neutralize this gendered dimension by forcedly adding a female writer to my case studies. Instead, I acknowledge the masculine coding of monumentality and make it part of my critical readings of these works.

characters are "crusaders for revolutionizing art and changing the world," answered "I feel enormous affection towards this project . . . The project is hopelessly romantic, essentially revolutionary . . . [but] the truth for me – and I want to be very sincere – is that the idea of revolution had already been devalued by the time I was twenty years old" (Soto and Bravo 2009: 45).

10 In fact, monumentality is so intricately tied up with a masculine model of authorship, that this classification seems to rule out female writers per definition. In this respect Katie Roiphe has written a thought-provoking essay entitled "Her Struggle," in which she asks "What if *My Struggle* by the Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard were written by Carla Olivia Krauss of Cobble Hill, Brooklyn. Would we care as much?" (Roiphe 2014: n.p.). Roiphe suggests that Knausgård's long-winded reports on the minutiae of suburban family life, if written by a woman, would not be praised for their bold, original nature, but rather condemned on account of being banal and self-indulgent: "what in a male writer appears as courage or innovation or literary heroics would be read, in a woman . . . as hubris or worse" (*Ibid.*) This example drives home not only the masculine connotation of the project of writing 'big, ambitious novels,' but also the important fact that monumental qualities are not fixed. They are always at least partially dependent upon the reader.

The corpus' aspect of neo-romanticism, and the resultant inseparability between these oeuvres and their authors' biographies, makes for the most important difference with their predecessors of the 1980s and 1990s. I specifically have in mind a group of postmodern authors that includes Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo and Richard Powers, who write what Tom LeClair calls "systems novels" (1989), systemic 'meganovels' marked by an all-encompassing scope and a thematic emphasis on information and cyber-technology. For me, Bolaño, Danielewski, Vollmann, and Knausgård represent a different phase in literature, in which the relation between literary narrative and digitalization and databases is not one of simple mimicry, but a complex of simultaneous resistance, 'working through,' and competition. In other words, these authors cannot be conclusively understood as adapting to 'the new,' because they actively try to preserve and archive 'the old' at the same time. That is exactly why we arrive at a better understanding of them through the prism of nineteenth-century monumentality, with its double temporal logic of looking back to literature's origins and forward to the future of the novel.

Method

My method is comparative in terms of geographical contexts (US, Norway, and Chile). With this transnational focus I depart from the methodology of scholars like Michael Tavel Clarke in *These Days of Large Things: The Culture of Size in America, 1865-1930* (2007). Clarke perceives bigness in literature, culture, and society as an emphatically American phenomena. Academics who have written on big works of literary fiction tend to consider them as a typically American way of writing. This assumption causes literary scholars like Mark Greif (1990) to use the expression 'big ambitious novel' as synonymous for 'big, American novel' (See also: Leo Spitzer qtd. in Moretti 1996: 64; LeClair 1989: 2; Portelli 1994: 81). The novels I study in this dissertation, by contrast, do not focus on their cultural or national origins so much as on their transnational *literary* heritage. My geographically diversified corpus shows that the aesthetics of monumentality does not let itself be explained from a national perspective alone: it is decisively a supranational development. Or rather: the monumental novel has become a global phenomenon that transcends national boundaries.

This integral study of monumentality in the novel innovates by offering a comparative and cross-cultural perspective on these writers. The last years have witnessed an interest in the quantitative aspects of scope and length of the oeuvres by individual authors like Roberto Bolaño (Andrews 2014; Hoyos 2015), William T. Vollmann (Hemmingson 2009), and David Foster Wallace (Boswell 2014). However, the only truly comparative study of contemporary big novels to date is Ercolino's *The Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño's 2666*

(2014). Ercolino's study differs from mine in his structuralist approach to literature, and his explicit aim of identifying the "morphological and symbolic identity" (xiii) of the maximalist genre through exactly ten principles.¹¹ The result is useful as a checklist of characteristics of maximalist styles in the novel; however, Ercolino does not perform close analyses of the texts he discusses. As Kiron Ward argues in his critical review essay in a recent issue of *Textual Practice*, *The Maximalist Novel* loses sight of the "hermeneutic focus" of literary scholarship (2015: 8). By contrast, my research is not concerned so much with defining a genre as with understanding, from a broader media-theoretical and philosophical vantage point, why and how a current monumentality manifests itself in literature today. Also, my research questions what this means for (the future of) narrativity, literary representations, and literariness. At the same time, my study ventures to answer these 'big questions' through close readings of the texts themselves, which remain central to the argument at all times. Thus, I strive to both broaden and deepen the scope of current thinking on monumentality in the novel.

In itself, the topic of big novels, it should be clear, is all but new. Earlier studies have been carried out to map the genres of the 'big, ambitious novel' (Greif 1990), the *novela totalizadora* (Vargas Llosa 1991), the 'modern epic' (Moretti 1996), the 'encyclopedic novel' (Mendelson 1976; Sainz 1983), and, recently, the 'maximalist novel' (Ercolino 2014). None of these explicitly places the material volume and thematic scale of these works of literature in the context of a changing media-scape. Moreover, monumentality in size has not yet been brought in relation to the commemorative dimension of literary texts, which is reflected in the notion of the text as monument. In this respect, earlier studies have either chosen a historical *or* a medium-specific vantage point: the novel as monument (Rigney 2004; 2008; Assmann 2011) or the monumentally big novel (Ercolino 2012; 2014; Andrews 2014; Boswell 2014).¹² My project furthers these previous enquiries by connecting the two topics. To understand the monumental effects of the oeuvres under consideration here, size and matter are thought together. The four chapters following this introduction therefore bring the commemorative dimension of the novel together with its monumental bigness.

11 These principles are: Length; Encyclopaedic mode; Dissonant chorality; Diegetic exuberance; Completeness; Narratorial omniscience; Paranoid imagination; Intersemioticity; Ethical commitment; Hybrid realism, xii-xiv.

12 The exception to this statement is Assmann's *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archive* (2011) in which she does emphasize the importance of considering the materiality of the diverse media of cultural memory, thus bringing together memory and medium-specificity. However, the historical and media-material scope of this book is so enormous that Assmann does not go into individual examples of literary works and their narrative structures, as is my *modus operandi* here.

Monumental volume, I want to stress, can only be fully understood today by thinking through current technocultural transformations concerning digitalization, big data, and quantification. My research is built on the premise that literary texts should be studied not in isolation, but rather as part of a larger media ecology. It opens up a dialogue between the contemporary novel, old and new aesthetic theories, and philosophies of media. This approach will enable me to develop new critical frames and innovative perspectives on the dynamics between literature and new media. Therein lies the contribution of my work to the fields of comparative literary studies, literary theory, contemporary aesthetics, and media theory.

Furthermore, this thesis approaches literature from a perspective that N. Katherine Hayles terms ‘comparative media studies,’ an umbrella term for critical projects that “explore synergies between print and digital media” and thus bridge the growing divide between digital and traditional humanities pursuits. Motivated by concerns regarding that divide, Hayles expresses her interest in “approaches that can locate digital work within print traditions, and print traditions within digital media, without obscuring or failing to account for the differences between them.” (2012: 7; see also Hayles and Pressman 2013). Such studies help us better to understand the genealogical links between contemporary media and earlier literary forms, and the extent to which pre-digital literary modes and styles anticipate the cultural dynamics of the digital era. As part of this project, my thesis will lay bare the multi-directional logic between literature and new media that informs these monumental novels. This will generate insight in literature as part of an inclusive, diversified media ecology.

Last, I wish to typify my method for the present study as one starting from the notion of ‘media divergence’. ‘Convergence’ (Jenkins 2006) is a prevalent tendency in media studies to consider the digital as the point where all media meet and merge in one integral media platform. ‘Divergence,’ however, points to a more complex dynamic of media-interaction in the present. It describes a dynamic of material diversity rather than digital expansion and unification alone (Brillenburger Wurth, Espi and Van de Ven 2013). This logic of divergence comes to the fore in my assessments of the differences as well as the similarities between novel and database (chapter two); the novel and selfies, social networking sites, timelines, blogs, and tracking devices (chapter three); and the novel and Global Information Systems such as Google Earth (chapter four). Only through a methodology of divergence can we understand how the novel reinvents itself in dialogue with the digital, but without being subsumed or disappearing altogether under the digital’s logic. Such an approach refutes the logic of obsolescence (cf. Fitzpatrick 2006) as well as technological determinism. It allows us to move beyond book nostalgia (e.g. Birkerts’ *Gutenberg Elegies*, 1994) and speculations about the death

of the novel by screens. This approach reveals how literature and new media enter in a complex interaction and operate under an inclusive logic ('and/and,' instead of 'or/or').

Structure

As noted, I begin my investigation into a contemporary monumentality in, and of, the novel, by construing a comparative framework of monumentality in the nineteenth century. I hypothesize that through 'monumental' strategies and effects, contemporary novelists attempt to create a sense of stability for literature in the face of changes in the media-landscape and our habits of reading and interpretation. This chapter situates the recent novels that are the focus of this dissertation in a literary past, in order to analyze their function in the present and their investment in preserving the novel as a monument for the future. More precisely, I propose three outstanding points of congruence between these twenty-first century novelistic strategies and effects, and nineteenth-century monumentality: first, that the monumental gains in importance against a background of changes in culture and media; second, a dual temporality (part linear, 'historical' and part circular, 'aesthetic') underlying monumentality; and third, the way artist and oeuvre are joined together in the monument. I structure this comparison by first providing an overview of these characteristics in their original context of emergence, and then examining how they play out in the present. I outline the most important factors that presently influence monumentality in, and of, the novel, and introduce the specific devices and strategies these works employ. This first chapter lays the ground-work for my analyses in the rest of this study, as it provides the comparative theoretical framework in which I place the novels that are the focus of the following chapters.

In a second chapter I address one of the transformations that inspire the novel's monumental characteristics: the current 'database aesthetics' in the 'analog' novel.¹³ Though generally conceived as a recent artistic development, I demonstrate how this database aesthetics is rooted in an eighteenth-century tradition of the mathematical and Romantic sublime that revolves around excess, absence, and expendability. This chapter therefore seeks to lay bare how the sublime encodes itself today in the monumental novel as an aesthetics of data overload. How does the sublime as data overload reflect on the relation between narrative and database as competing ways of ordering the world? What representational strategies are at the novel's disposal when 'telling' is increasingly understood as 'counting' (Ernst 2013) and when its

¹³ I place 'analog' between inverted commas because the processes of printing the book-bound novel have mostly been digitized in the last decades. 'Analog' refers to the material form of the product, but not the process of construction.

overarching frame is no longer the hierarchical beginning, middle, end structure of the story (Manovich 2001; Van Alphen 2014)? These questions will be probed on the basis of an analysis of Roberto Bolaño's *2666* (2004). As we will see, the current manifestation of the sublime as data overload has far-reaching ramifications for the idea of the novel as a monument or memorial structure. Can the monumental novel function as a memorial for those that are overlooked in society, when its organizing principles are archival rather than narrative (and when, as is the case in Bolaño's *2666*, over a hundred victims are 'immortalized')? Exploring the characteristics of the current sublime of data overload as it emerges in the monumental novel allows us to deepen our understanding of the impact of technology upon our culture and the conditions for literary fiction in an age of big data.

Chapter three addresses the issue of big data and related trends of datafication and 'Quantified Self,' asking how these developments influence our expressions of personal memory, our self-representations and, ultimately, self-understanding. How does monumental autobiography position itself with respect to the new possibilities for self-(re)presentation offered by tracking, quantifying strategies, and social media? I analyze Knausgård's series of autobiographical novels *My Struggle* in a comparative media-framework of current trends in self-representation in new media and on social networking sites. Going against the author's professed anti-media stance and Romantic ideals, I examine how Knausgård's writing closely intertwines with contemporary developments in media and technologies of self-representation and self-expression—such as self-photography, time-lapse videos, blogs, self-tracking, and automated diaries. I argue in this chapter that the autobiographical novel reinvents itself as monumental by incorporating the serial, archival modes of self-representations of the internet, and the 'N=all' approach of big data, into writing. Breaking the narrative mold and the subjective scope of autobiography through quantification and seriality, Knausgård monumentalizes the self and the everyday.

In addition, this chapter probes the dissimilarities between the autobiographical novel and recent media. What does the form of the novel add to the current media-scape marked by size, scale, seriality, and quantity? I will show how *My Struggle* embodies a resistance to prevalent tendencies in media towards positivism, simultaneity, and immediacy. The monumental novel embodies this resistance in its form, through a foregrounding of mediacy (as opposed to the transparency of data), and delay (as opposed to simultaneity of recording online). Thus the second chapter offers new insights in the ways in which the monumental autobiography stresses what is special about the book-bound novel in contrast to the immediacy and perceived transparency of self-recording through new media.

The fourth and last chapter of this thesis ventures from a paradox in current possibilities for presenting the world in media. On the one hand, the world is sublimely unrepresentable, as in its vastness, it exceeds every possible representation we could create of it. On the other hand, through networked media and globalization, the world is becoming smaller. This paradox makes commenting on the global a challenge for novels that incorporate an exceedingly large number of different geographic settings in their narration. How can monumental novels renegotiate the local and the planetary, without falling prey to the ideological pitfalls of 'totalizing' representations? What framework can best serve us when we want to analyze writers who are ambitious enough to take on a whole array of heterogeneous entities dispersed across cultures and nations? In this chapter I analyze William T. Vollmann's *The Atlas* (1996) and Mark Z. Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* (2006), and argue that these works each in their own way create literary worlds that maintain a referential relation to the horizons of our concrete world, and neither attempt to cover up asymmetrical power relations between the U.S.A. and the rest of the world, nor their own role in these imbalances.

My theoretical frame for this last chapter draws on Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of *mondialisation* or world-forming (2007). *Mondialisation* opposes globalization as an oppressive, homogenizing force, and entails a 'creation' of the world through imaginative reflection on alternative possible forms for the globe. In their inventions of new material forms for literature to reflect on our relations to the world, I argue, Vollmann and Danielewski further this project of world-forming. In their artistic attempts to encompass 'the world' in their works, moreover, both authors use the medium-specific affordances of the book-bound novel in innovative ways. Thus they are able to transmit the sense of enclosure we experience as the world becomes global. The book object becomes a spatialized metaphor for our experiences of worldliness under the influence of globalization, and formally enacts an experience the protagonists suffer from, characterized by a lack of a *beyond*. Reading Vollmann and Danielewski together will reveal how monumental works are able to represent global situations in a critical way, without denying their own implication in these situations.

Through an analysis of these different aspects of monumentality in the novel, my thesis opens up new perspectives on literature in relation to the evolving and expanding life-world of the present. It demonstrates how monumentality is one of the most important ways in which literature is currently transformed and thought anew in a complex, dynamic interaction with the larger media-scape. It argues that, by adapting to new forms and scopes of reference, reimagining earlier modes of representation for the present, and stressing its own unique affordances, the novel assures its own proliferation in a global and digital age.

Chapter one

Monumentality and the Novel From the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century

In this first chapter I outline the nature of the novel's monumentality as made manifest in the works of the four writers I study in the following chapters. I construe a theoretical framework of nineteenth-century monumentality that will allow me to grasp the central characteristics of the monumental and to historicize this phenomenon by placing it in its proper socio-cultural context of origin. I propose that the monumental tendencies of the contemporary novels under scrutiny can only be fully understood in such a comparative framework. The nineteenth century marked a period in which monumentality was called upon to offer a sense of cultural stability in a society in technological and social transformation (see Garval 2003; Mathijssen 2013; Rigney and Leerssen 2014). I hypothesize that in its monumental strategies and effects, twenty-first century literature attempts to create a similar sense of stability for literature itself, in the face of changes in the media-landscape and our habits of reading and interpretation. Thus, this chapter seeks to situate these recent novels in a literary past, in order to analyze their function in the present, and their investment in preserving the novel as a monument for the future.

More specifically, there are three outstanding points of congruence between these twenty-first century novelistic strategies and effects, and nineteenth-century monumentality: first, the monumental gains in importance against a background of changes in culture and media; second, a double-take on history underlies monumentalism itself; and third, artist and work are joined together in the monument. Before getting to these points, however, and in order to understand to what developments in media and society the monumental novel responds,

I will begin by reviewing the contemporary arguments for the ‘death of the novel’ that implicitly inform the monumentality of these novels: anxieties over dwindling attention spans, as well as the incapacity to select from, and evaluate, the mass of texts available.

I then move on to illustrate the usefulness of the concept of monumentality for our understanding of the novel as part of the present-day media ecology. Writers today choose to foreground the novel’s monumental potential in reaction to technological changes such as digitalization and big data, and social changes brought about by globalization. As I argue in this chapter, the works under study are specifically monumental because of their use of narrative strategies that are akin to archiving such as the anaphoric singulative mode, lists, and counting, resulting in excess, expansion, and interminability. As a direct result, they amount to a literary monumentality in both senses of commemoration and bigness. These works are marked by an inclusive urge to preserve what is judged as important and valuable, which, coupled with an unwillingness to select, results in extraordinary volume.

Even as current developments of digitalization and globalization exert a profound influence on ‘analog’ literature, I argue that these novels also emphasize their difference with respect to the engulfing flow of data in society. They underscore the novel’s ability to incorporate meaningful information and exclude the rest. By foregrounding its own monumental potential, the novel both adapts to social and technological changes *and* stresses its unique affordances, thus living on as an important part of today’s media ecology. Bringing together the colossal and the memorial, monumental novels strive to communicate a continuing importance for literature, assuring its proliferation in a dialogue with its past.

1.1 The ‘Death of the Novel’ Today: Attention, Selection, and Valuation

As I pointed out in the introduction to this thesis, the question of the end of the novel has been given new urgency during the last decade. Authors such as Lars Iyer (2011), Milan Kundera (2007), Philip Roth (qtd. in Colman 2011), David Shields (2010), and Will Self (2014) have all recently expressed a pessimistic outlook on the survival of the novel in the near future.¹⁴ An oft-mentioned cause for this alleged ‘death of the novel’ is the popularity and omnipresence of newer media. This should not surprise us: as Marshall McLuhan and his son Eric wrote in *Laws of Media: The New Science* (1988), it is a consistent factor in the reception of media (and other technological ‘extensions’) that, with the emergence of

14 See also Kernan 1990; Birkerts 1994; Franzen 1996; Compagnon 2000; Marx 2005; Millet 2007; Todorov 2007; McCarthy 2015.

a new medium, an old medium is expected to become obsolete. Thus, the telephone, as an extension of the human voice, lessens the need for the art of penmanship. The 'death of the novel' has been (and continues to be) a particularly popular instance of this logic of obsolescence.

It is important to note that predicting the novel's demise is an activity easily as old as the novel itself, as Kathleen Fitzpatrick shows in *The Anxiety of Obsolescence* (2006). In 1758, to give an example, Samuel Richardson suspected that the novel had already run its course (Gallix 2012). In 1902, Jules Verne predicted newspapers would replace novels within years (Lacassin 1979: 383). In the relatively short history of the print novel, its impending end had already been apprehended as a result of the rise of what were once new media and technologies, such as the telegraph, telephone, radio, photography, television, and film (See Fitzpatrick 2006: 11-58; Elliott 2003). Yet, following all these landmarks, the production, publication, and consumption of novels continued unabatedly.

What is it about the novel that causes these predictions of obsolescence, and, more importantly, what is it about this genre that allows it to live on after its predicted 'death' time and again? I believe the reason for this continuous cycle of death and rebirth is that the novel is not a static, homogeneous art form. As noted in my introduction, theorists of the novel (from Ortega y Gasset to Lukács to Bakhtin) have remarked upon the hybridity and heterogeneity of the genre, its ability to include multiple codes. In constant interaction with our present, changing life-world, adapting to the socio-cultural and technological structures surrounding it, the novel is able to project itself beyond its own apprehended demise time after time.

Fitzpatrick therefore concludes that the novel both resists and requires its own theoretical death to adapt to an increasingly changing political, technological, and social reality. J. Paul Hunter, too, has argued (1990) that the genre of the novel is able to remain 'novel' to the extent that it constantly innovates in relation to its contemporary environment of popular culture and media. It is the driving force behind the genre, whose name already indicates the constant pressure of pursuing 'the new'. Hence Bakhtin's assertion that the novel is the only genre that remains uncompleted and radically open-ended, is always in development, in a dynamic, organic processes of becoming. In "Epic and Novel" (1941) he wrote of the "organic fullness" of the "living whole of literature." The novel, "most fluid of genres," he famously stated, is in close harmony with the "unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality" (2008a:5; 11; 7). The novel renews itself over and over; it is new in whatever age it emerges.

At this point, the reader might wonder why I take the trouble to discuss current arguments of the 'death of the novel,' when I have just established that these death notices recurring, yet the novel survives

time and again. Why should we take the novel's death seriously when it never takes place, what knowledge will such a discussion generate? I certainly do not propose we take these announcements of the novel's death at face value. They are a type of speculation on the future of literature that is often emotionally charged and informed by larger underlying fears and anxieties, hopes, and dreams incited by a changing life-world. Whereas the issues arising from the digitalization¹⁵ of texts, which I will now briefly outline are a real part of today's media-scape, pronouncements on the death of the novel related to digitalization are speculative conjectures constructed on beliefs. I am not going to answer those beliefs by reinstating my own, or by finding statistical or empirical proof to invalidate or confirm them. In other words, I will not take a stance in the debate on the death of the novel.¹⁶

It is not the truth value or prophetic potential of these speculations that interests me here, but the fact that such beliefs are part of the cultural imaginary of the literary novel. As such, they affect the ways in which literature is written, they tell us something about the specific ways in which novels adapt and survive today. Besides, the novel does more than adapt to these changes. It also has the ability to reflect on what it represents, and to stress what is special about its own form in relation to these changes in technology and society. As I will show throughout this dissertation, novels are able to defamiliarize and bring to our attention the very developments that allegedly 'threaten' them, to reflect critically on these newer cultural and media practices and reinforce the difference between these and their own modes of representation.

Taken together, the assorted strategies of four contemporary novelists that I outline in this thesis under the header 'monumentality' will offer us insight in the specific manners in which the novel 'survives' in the digital age, by adapting to change *and* reinscribing its own unique affordances. This monumentality, the present chapter will argue, enables us to see how literature is currently reformed and rethought in interaction with a larger media ecology. Thus, I argue, digital media do not erase the 'analog'

15 For the sake of clarity, I differentiate between 'digitization' and 'digitalization.' I employ the first term to refer to processes by which analog media forms are transferred into digital media files, for instance the scanning and storage of paper-bound books in databases such as Google Books. 'Digitalization' refers more broadly to the transformation of contemporary culture by digital media, including digitization practices but also the shift in production to a culture that is mostly digital-born, the widespread mediation of communication in digital networks, and possible transformations of the human cognition and sensorium in this digital media environment.

16 The discourse on the death of the novel resembles a self-perpetuating mechanism, propelled forward by its refutations as much as by the death announcements themselves: the latest essay on the "Death of the Novel" or book on the *End of Literature* is usually followed by articles with titles like "The Novel is not Dead" (Row 2011), "The Death of the Death of the Novel" (Young 2008), and "Refusing the Death of the Novel" (Aravamudan 2011). See also Wieringa 2014.

novel, but produce it anew. The novel reinvents itself *as monumental* in dialogue with the digital. In order to derive insight in literature's future as part of a larger media ecology, it is informative to inquire what it is exactly that *supposedly* ails the novel in our time. Two issues are of particular interest if we want to answer this question, since the novels that will be the focus of the following chapters pose a response to them. These issues are the alleged shortening of attention spans, and problems of selection and valuation caused by the digital uploading, combining, and storing of texts, for which the database is a figure. I turn now to the first of these.

Recently, media theorists have expressed concerns regarding the influence of new media on the attention spans of readers. N. Katherine Hayles claims that a shift in cognitive modes is taking place, turning from the deep attention needed for humanistic inquiry and heading towards the hyperattention that is typical in the act of scanning Web pages (2007: 188). In *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (2012), she writes that 'web reading' solicits a different state of attention than reading books, that she calls hyperattention.¹⁷ The enormous amount of material online that awaits us for reading leads to skimming instead of prolonged attention to one source of input. Hyperlinks draw away our focus from the linear flow of the text, very short forms of writing like tweets promote reading in a state of distraction, and small habitual actions such as clicking and navigating increase the cognitive load of web reading (12). As contemporary media environments become more information-intensive, Hayles claims, hyperattention and its associated strategy of hyperreading are growing in importance and frequency, while deep attention and its associated acts of close reading are diminishing,

17 Hayles addresses certain features of web reading that make it a powerful practice for "rewiring the brain" (2010: 67). Hyperattention and deep attention, she feels, each have their respective advantages. While deep attention is essential when coping with complex phenomena such as "mathematical theorems, challenging literary works, and complex musical compositions" (72), hyperattention can be useful for "its flexibility in switching between different information streams, its quick grasp of the gist of the material, and its ability to move quickly among and between different kinds of texts" (*Ibid*). On (the demise of) deep reading, see also *Proust and the Squid: the Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (2007) by developmental psychologist Maryanne Wolf. When the printing press made the large-scale production of long, complex works of prose feasible, a style of deep reading emerged. Now, she argues, our capacities of interpreting and making mental connections are more and more often left disengaged, and may be weakening as a consequence (13-20). Wolf characterizes the style of reading that the Internet solicits as marked by 'efficiency' and 'immediacy'. When we read online, she says, we tend to turn into decoders of information. One might criticize the binary logic underlying both Hayles's and Wolf's categorization of the different forms of attention of Internet and literary reading. Kristin Veel offers a correction to this binary in her article "Information Overload and Database Aesthetics" (2011). She points to the fact that today, we need distraction in order to concentrate: "distraction is not the opposite of concentration, but rather its precondition" (312).

especially among the 'digital native' generation.¹⁸

Predictably, these developments have given rise to worries about the future of the novel.¹⁹ The shift to hyperattention has led critics and writers to worry that soon readers will no longer be cognitively equipped to read extended prose narratives. In this respect I already mentioned the example of Philip Roth, who predicts that the 'screen' technologies of computer and television condition our brains to the point where the old "single-focus requirement," the devout mode of concentration needed for slowly reading a book, will become an "elegiac exercise" (qtd. in Flood 2009: par.1).²⁰ It will not be long, Roth believes, before the novel turns into an elite form for a small cult of readers.

The second related concern about the novel's survival that has arisen in the last decades pertains to the problem of *selection*. A chief characteristic of book-bound novels is their delineation in space, their finite nature. As Johanna Drucker writes, "the codex form ... is bounded by the frame of the page and the binding of the book, with the defining quality of a page's edge [being] its delineation of illusory space and non-illusory space" (1997: 97). Due to its delimited form and therefore necessarily selective scope, the medium of the book is a remnant of the compression

18 Several studies have been carried out that attempt to find evidence for the digital consumer's need to 'multitask' in order to keep boredom at bay for the increasingly impatient nature of the 'Google Generation,' and for its lowered tolerance for delay. See Frand 2000: 18; Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg 2007; Johnson 2006; Shih and Allen 2006; Rowlands and Williams 2007: 17. Whereas the studies by Johnson and Shih and Allen present this intolerance for delay as a characteristic of the digitally native Google Generation, Rowlands and Williams argue that it holds true for all generations exposed to digital technologies living at the present moment.

19 Of course, these techno-eschatological doom scenarios are of all times: worries about attention spans are comparable to Plato's warning in Phaedrus about the negative effects of writing on memory, and the discussion about information overload that arose in the period 1550-1750, after the emergence of the printing press when Europe faced a vast increase in the production, circulation, and dissemination of scientific and scholarly texts (see Rosenberg 2003). In a description strongly reminiscent of the current anxieties about digital media, Walter Benjamin has characterized the selection and creation of information for newspapers as following principles of freshness, brevity, comprehensibility, and lack of connection between the different items. This short and fragmentary nature is reinforced by the layout of the pages and the style of the paper. Through these qualities, the medium causes an "increasing atrophy of experience" (1999a: 155-56). In her study on Stéphane Mallarmé, Anna Sigridur Arnar, too, writes about the perceived threat that the newspaper posed to the novel by inspiring new, fragmentary ways of reading, and the collapse (krach) of the book publishing industry (2011: 30-31).

20 Similar arguments about the distractions of new media and their negative influence on readers' capacities for reading novels are construed by Kyle Beachy (2011); Larry Weissman (1997) and Sven Birkerts (2010). A related point of concern is that attention to longer prose narratives would be endangered by e-books. Electronic books, after all, have built-in possibilities for distraction when wirelessly hooked up to the Internet and thus "allow us to watch movies and Skype and skim the newspaper while we mean to be reading *The Magic Mountain*." (Hallberg 2011: 84). See also Rosen 2008: 30.

of data that characterized media before what Marshall McLuhan has termed the 'Electronic Age' (1964). Precisely because of the structural boundedness and demarcated form of the codex, 'analog' novels, by their very medium-specific nature, necessitate a selection and compression of the material they present.

Digital media, on the other hand, are (in potential) more inclusive and less discriminatory: they render selection in the collection of data and their compression unnecessary. Today's information culture is marked by a constant expansion of new data, which can be added to existing relational databases without disrupting their order. This flexibility grants their potential expansion without limitation (Hayles 2007a: 1607). The omnipresence of the database as a new cultural form and the online uploading of books have two important consequences concerning *scope* and *duration*. Both factors are important aspects of monumentality. Encompassed by this new environment, the individual book-bound novel seems diminutive and slight in comparison.

In terms of scope, the contents of individual books are integrated into bigger and bigger networks of texts, and the oeuvres of canonical authors are usurped by the continuously expanding structures of online databases.²¹ The Internet is virtually all-encompassing in its range of information, and when individual books are uploaded, they are made a part of this global whole. Such an effect of infinite expansion is produced by the current development of books being literally usurped by digitization. Google, as well as non-profit organizations such as Project Gutenberg, the Million Book Project and the Internet Archive, carry out big-scale projects to scan and upload the contents of whole libraries at a time. Kevin Kelly, co-founder of *Wired* magazine, sees cause for celebration: "[o]nce books are digital, books seep out of their bindings and weave themselves together. The collective intelligence of a library allows us to see things we can't see in a single, isolated book" (2006). The Kindle is already a step in this direction of the book 'seeping out of its bindings': it is perpetually 'wired' through a free Internet connection, so its users can browse the Internet, listen to music, read newspapers through subscription, and even self-publish their texts. So far, Google has uploaded 30 million books. It would take a human twenty thousand years to read such a vast collection at the reasonable pace of two hundred words per minute, without interruptions for food or sleep (Aiden and Michel 2013: 47). Such volumes would only be analyzable through quantitative methods such as distant reading (Moretti 2013),

21 See for instance *The Walt Whitman Archive* <<http://www.whitmanarchive.org>>, edited by Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price), an electronic tool for research and teaching developed by the University of Texas at Austin in collaboration with the Center for Digital Research in the Humanities at the University of Nebraska. The tool makes Whitman's work available including annotations and accompanied by contemporary commentary on history, science, theology, and art.

aimed at discovering patterns in vast bodies of text. The overload of information that becomes accessible through datafication could prompt literary scholars to train themselves in textmining, machine-reading, and algorithmic analyses: methods that are already employed by the digital humanities (Burdick et al. 2012: 38). The practice of reading individual texts, Franco Moretti provocatively states, thus becomes obsolete. He dismisses qualitative literary analysis as “a theological exercise” (2013: 48).²² In this respect, we can speak of an ever-increasing expansion of the range of information, culminating in networks that are monumental in size.

Besides this enormous dilation of scope, there is yet a second respect in which the uploading of books gestures toward the monumental; this time in its second meaning of duration of life-span. A constant factor in the history of technology is that each new wave of technologies gives way to new hopes of immortality. As Aleida Assmann writes, “[t]he more “immaterial” the medium, the greater evidently are its chances of immortality” (2011: 180). Inventions like the scroll, the codex, the pocketbook, and the Kindle have all increased the portability of texts, decreased their materiality, and thus advanced their chances of an afterlife. And indeed, digitization, as the latest in this series of developments, preserves books for longer periods compared to the relatively ephemeral materiality of the codex.²³ Like the increase in scope offered by the database, this potential for prolongation of the literary afterlife by digital storage has given rise to unbridled optimism. As Robert Clark Young enthuses in his essay “The Death of the Death of the Novel” (2008):

Unlike the young Faulkner, ... new writers will never go out of print. The digitizing efforts by Google and leading publishers such as Harper-Collins mean that all of the forgotten “mid-list” books of the past century will have new lives, and that no book, new or old, high sales or low, will ever suffer artistic or commercial death. Those of us who Google-up as authors today will continue to live as search results for eternity. Our immortality will be more easily bought than that of the pharaohs,

22 Drucker (2011) has taken issue with the claims of objective knowledge informing these quantitative methods, as they threaten to devalue interpretation and signification: “At stake . . . is the authority of humanistic knowledge in a culture increasingly beset by quantitative approaches that operate on claims of certainty” (6).

23 This idea, that digitization increases the life-span of information, contains a slight generalization. In “Memory Matters in the Digital Age,” José van Dijck nuances this techno-teleological logic by reminding us that digital memories can also fade, for instance because the durability of hard drives, compact disks, and memory sticks has yet to be proven, and software can become obsolete (2004: 370-71).

as none of us will require a pyramid made of two-ton blocks of granite to preserve our names and triumphs. Digital coding, taking up no more space than the period at the end of this sentence, will prove hefty enough for our literary monuments to outlast Ozymandias. (174-75)

In uploading our books for posterity into binary code, Young believes, we will finally fulfill age-old dreams of reaching infinity and attaining immortality through literature.

Thus, digitization has re-awakened utopian visions of *bigness* in scope of what can be stored, and a *duration* of storage bordering on the infinite. Because it is (potentially and theoretically) all-encompassing in scope and never-ending in duration, Andreas Huyssen proclaims in his essay "Monumental Seductions" (1996) that the digital has become the ultimate locus for the monumental:

the monumental has migrated from the real to the image, from the material to the immaterial, and ultimately into the digitized computer bank. . . . some will look for the new public space on the Internet, falling for the lure of the monumental promise of conquering both time and space, . . . For the World Wide Web is in principle the most gigantic undertaking of our age, as promising to some and threatening to others as any monumentalism has ever been. (199-200)

Huyssen's description of digital environments as the ultimate spaces of monumentality echoes oft-heard claims that Richard Wagner's ideal of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* as the integration of all the arts (introduced in his essay *The Art-work of the Future* in 1849) has migrated into cyberspace (Smith 2007; Packer and Jordan 2001). Next to this huge, absorbing monster, the book-bound novel looks positively hermetic.

But *pace* Kelly's envisioned utopian scenarios of collectivity and immortality, as well as Young and other champions of the digitization of texts: there are also downsides to this process of growing scope and duration, one of which is particularly meaningful in relation to the novel. Due to the overwhelming quantity of information at our disposal owing to digitization, age-old questions of selection, distinction, and discrimination receive a new sense of urgency. As Jacques Derrida writes in *Paper Machine*, the gradual dissolution of the individual literary corpus in an indistinct flow of information online poses the problem

of the future relationship between on the one hand the form *book*, the model of the book, and on the other hand a work in general, an *oeuvre*, an opus, the unity or body of an oeuvre marked out by a beginning and an end, and so a totality: assumed to be conceived and produced, and indeed signed by an author, a single identifiable author, and offered up for the respectful reading of a reader who doesn't meddle with it, doesn't transform it on the inside – in what we now call an “interactive” way. (2005: 6)

Without their support in books, paper, and physical collections, Derrida claims, individual works (and individual authors along with them) enter a crisis of identity. Joseph Tabbi has stronger reservations about critics like Kelly who are all too eager to celebrate the book's liberation from its bindings:

We will have reached a post-history in the worst sense if the net realizes its commercial ambitions of becoming the only medium, swallowing all others, and reducing print, image, and sound alike to an array of interchangeable bits reaching the individual household via fiber optic cable. . . . The notion of culture as an endlessly expanding hypertext, a postmodern nightmare of infinite connectivity and ever-increasing complexity, is one that writers and scientists would do well to get beyond. There is no future in further accumulation, the continued proliferation of information without narrative constraints. (1995: n.p.)

Who will read all these texts and decide what matters, what we value enough to preserve? When it comes to art and literature, how do we assert quality when the database, as a great equalizer, takes over the already enfeebled canon?²⁴ These questions are still open to ponder not only for critics, but for novelists as well.

As indicated at the beginning of this section, the novel adapts to changing social, cultural, and technological circumstances by taking the fragmentary remains of its previous forms and recombining them into something new, thus warranting its survival. This implies that the current utopian and dystopian imaginings of the digital do not leave novels unaltered. As Hayles insists, digitalization leaves its mark on

²⁴ Ed Folsom goes as far as retrospectively diagnosing that “[w]hat we used to call the canon wars were actually the first stirrings of the attack of database on narrative” (2007: 1574)

print texts, even if those texts remain entirely conventional in the ways they appear and function (2005: 34). Obviously, changes in the materiality of the text affect the ways in which novels are produced, published, distributed, and consumed. In addition, the present study explores how these changes affect the structures and organizing principles of book-bound novels and, as a result, their scope and volume.

Through their formal and structural properties, the novels under study reflect on these questions, especially in their use of representational strategies of the online database, marked by inclusivity, seriality, and quantity. By incorporating these combined strategies and modes of representation within the covers of the book and the linearity of narrative, they furthermore add a level of selection and critical evaluation. My case studies offer a response to the above-sketched changes in the media-scape, and the resultant questions about valuation, by underlining the monumental potential inherent in the novel in terms of scope and preservation. Inspired by the new possibilities of size and life-span for texts brought about by online databases, these works go back to earlier stages in literary history and modes of representation, to demonstrate how the novel was always already the monumental form of writing par excellence. Indeed, what constitutes a monument, as I will argue in more detail below, is not just duration and size, but also a certain measure of compression. A foremost characteristic of the monument is its would-be all-encompassing, closed off nature. In Sander van Maas's words, we expect that a monument attempts to "capture the past symbolically, in a condensed and poeticized form" (2012: 424). It is the condensation and selection warranted by the bound and finite character of the novel (as opposed to the online database), in combination with the new expansion in terms of size that current developments in new media inspire, that offer the novel a monumental scope *while* granting the condensation of which Van Maas writes.

In this chapter I construct a theoretical basis to understand the monumental aspects of these contemporary novels, by placing them in a comparative framework of nineteenth-century monumentality. Only after I have laid out this basis can I further zoom in on the specific strategies, principles, and narrative structures identifiable in each novel. I argue that these hold a middle ground between the archival and database structures on the one hand, and novelistic narrative on the other, and thus attain their exceptional volume by combining an inclusive and non-hierarchical scope with an emphasis on preservation and commemoration. By integrating novelistic narrative and database structure in innovative ways, these novels warrant a new field of scholarly inquiry, in-between literary and media studies.

1.2 The Novel as a Monument

To understand how a novel can be considered 'monumental' it is useful to start out with a working definition of the monument. This definition should combine a notion of lasting greatness with an emphasis on commemorative value. The word 'monument' derives from the Latin noun *monumentum*, which in turn comes from the verb *moneo*: 'to remind, to bring to the notice of, to tell of.' Like any act of communication, this implies a sender, a receiver, and a message. By defining the monument as that which is "determined to outlive the present and to speak in this distant horizon of cultural communication" (1991: 14),²⁵ Aleida Assmann furthermore adds to this definition a *temporal gap* between the sender and the receiver of the message, an element of testimony. The monument, as Van Maas helpfully adds, is able to manipulate our sense of time in such a way as to render present what is in the past (2012: 424). Through the monument we leave a deliberate physical marker for posterity, an 'I was here' or 'we were here' to an unknown future recipient. In order to fulfill this function, Assmann explains in her book *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization* (2011), the monument itself only needs to be materially present. The material out of which it is made, however, makes a difference in the extent to which the monument succeeds in fulfilling its basic function of testimony.

Assmann's research into media of memory establishes how, for long periods in history, text has been privileged as a vehicle for commemoration. Indeed, its advantages over other media are well documented. The invention of writing and even more so of printing once sparked the hope of eternal communication on permanent material carriers. In *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), for instance, Francis Bacon expressed great faith in the power of words contrasted to the monuments erected from matter, because of the greater durability of the former. After all, "have not the verses of Homer continued twenty-five hundred years, or more, without the loss of a syllable or letter; during which time infinite palaces, temples, castles, cities, have been decayed and demolished?" (1974: 70).²⁶ In typical Renaissance fashion, writing is here conceived of as a medium able to transcend time and space: even before the notion of authorial genius, writing was thought to have the power to preserve and even immortalize because of its enduring nature.

Besides temporal durability, textual monuments have a spatial advantage over their stone counterparts, as Ann Rigney has argued.

25 In the original: "was dazu bestimmt ist, die Gegenwart zu überdauern und im diesem Fernhorizont kultureller Kommunikation zu sprechen."

26 Another example that reflects this faith in the everlasting nature of the textual monument is Horace's dictum from his *Odes*: *exegi monumentum aere perennius* ("I have erected a monument more lasting than bronze," qtd. in Rehding 2009: 25).

Whereas statues are necessarily fixed on their geographical sites, texts are “portable monuments,” and their portability allows them to be lifted out of their historical and geographical context of origin (2004: 383) – though of course, this possibility of dislocation also de-literalizes the ‘we were here’ of the monument. The novel’s status as literary fiction, moreover, can positively influence its longevity. Because we value literary texts for their artistic merits, Rigney points out, we take care to preserve them as part of our cultural heritage. In its capacity as a portable monument, the novel itself functions as an object of remembrance or, with Pierre Nora’s term, a *lieu de mémoire* (*Ibid.* 384).²⁷

The belief in the longevity or staying power of the literary work explains how monumentality as a metonym for grandness in scope in turn gives rise to monumentality as a value judgment and an instrument of distinction for its incorporation into the posterity of the canon. The novels most often awarded this status as objects of remembrance and veneration fall under the category of the “masterpiece.”²⁸ Thus in his seminal study *Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to García Márquez*, Franco Moretti characterizes canonical mega-texts such as *Faust*, *Moby-Dick*, *The Nibelung’s Ring*, *Ulysses*, *The Cantos*, *The Waste Land*, *The Man Without Qualities* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as “not just any old books. They are monuments” (1996: 1).

When applied to contemporary works of literature by authors like Bolaño or Vollmann, the adjective ‘monumental’ suggests that these works are memorable enough to hang around for posterity. Their authors’ monumental ambition renders these novels weighty in a figural sense, important enough to preserve. Thus, it becomes a vehicle for speculation about the future of literature. In the idea of the literary monumental, commemoration and veneration come together. What we mean, then, when we call a novel a monument is both literature’s capacity to transmit historicity, with the novel as part of such a textual tradition of transmission, and the ability of novels to achieve artistic greatness in

27 The role played by monuments and other practices of commemoration in the process of nation-building and the construction of collective identities has for the last decades been a topic of great scholarly attention in various fields. This scrutiny was catalyzed by the seminal book *Lieux de mémoire* edited by Nora (2001), a wide-ranging series of essays by French historians written between the 1980s and the early 1990s that sparked a productive interdisciplinary field of memory studies. According to Nora, the attention paid to memory and history is caused not only by the political and economic crises of the twentieth century, but also by the increasing “acceleration” of history, in which the future appears ever less predictable, leading us to be obsessively connected to the past (xviii). This perceived unpredictability of the future, I argue below, was precisely the main cause for the proliferation of monumentality in the nineteenth century. Thus, it is only logical that the monumental finally finds its way back into the literary field.

28 The notion of the ‘masterpiece’ is itself by no means a-historical: according to David Damrosch, masterpieces rose to prominence in the nineteenth century as literary studies started considering a broader range of texts beside Greco-Roman classics (2003: 9).

their own right, assuring their proliferation.

But the basic definition of the text or the novel as a monument, which I have set up so far, is universally applicable to novels from all times and places, and not in itself enough to explain the specific monumental tendencies in and of the present-day works of Bolaño, Danielewski, Vollmann, and Knausgård. Their works do not stop at emphasizing the commemorative function of the novel as a monument, but also incorporate the over-proportionality and bombast of 'grand' styles, excessive narration, and an overwhelming length and scope. This other side of monumentality, of bigness in scope and volume, needs to be brought into the equation as well if we want to arrive at an understanding of the monumental today. To do this, we need to historicize. In emphasizing size and scale these novels do not only respond to current socio-technological developments, but also place themselves in a certain tradition of monumentality. In that respect, they remind us that not all is 'new' about the present.

A theoretical framework of literary monumentality is needed in order to understand why novels foreground their own potential for scope and duration in an age of omnipresent digital databases that envelop the individual book in ever larger networks. Such a theory will explain how the scale of these works relates to their commemorative agenda of preserving the novel, literature, or the book for future generations. The importance of rethinking monumental art and history for the twenty-first century has been emphasized by several seminal works: Huyssen's *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (2003); Matthew Wilson Smith's *The Total Work of Art from Bayreuth to Cyberspace* (2007); Alexander Rehding's *Music and Monumentality. Commemoration and Wonderment in Nineteenth-century Germany* (2009); as well as Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001). Whereas the notions of the monument and the monumental have been the object of debates in such diverse fields as art history, cultural studies, memory studies, geography, musicology, and media studies, the importance of monumentality for contemporary literature and literary studies has yet to be assessed. And while the notion of the literary text as an object and locus of remembrance has received ample attention in the fields of memory studies and cultural studies over the last decades,²⁹ there is no overarching theory for a monumentality of literature, which should include critical considerations of both a commemorative dimension of preserving the past, and a material dimension of size and scale.

29 See for instance Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archive* (2011; esp. 169-205); Marita Mathijsen, *Historiezucht. De obsessie met het verleden in de negentiende eeuw* (2013: 173-322); Ann Rigney, *The Afterlives of Walter Scott. Memory on the Move* (2012); and Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney (eds.), *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory* (2009).

Since such a theory has not yet been developed for twenty-first century literature, we must engage with monumentality as a large-scale cultural phenomenon in its original context of emergence. An overview of the characteristics of nineteenth-century monumentality will be useful as a starting point. Of course monuments were consistently present in all historical eras, for instance in the form of statues or triumphal arches. But, as Marita Mathijssen establishes, these earlier monuments in Europe were the equivalent of dogs' habit of spreading scents in order to communicate that "Hector was here." These monuments, she explains, are no more than marks of property, not so much meant to convey a sense of historical consciousness as to mark where the historical survivor has treaded (2013: 25). It was only with the emergence of the 'culture of remembrance' in the nineteenth century (catalyzed by what Nietzsche in 1874 called a "consuming historical fever" (1997: 8)) that the monument takes on its full meaning as a locus of remembrance *and* a signifier of historical greatness.

In order to recuperate a theoretical monumentality for the twenty-first century novel, we must therefore look back and revisit monuments of the nineteenth century. In what follows, I assess three aspects of monumentality that are of particular significance for the framing of the present research: the socio-historical context of cultures in flux, the double temporal logic underlying the monumental, and the unification of artist and work in the monument.

1.3 Comparative Framework: monumentality in the nineteenth century

In his book *Music and Monumentality: Commemoration and Wonderment in Nineteenth-century Germany* (2009), Alexander Rehding provides a theoretical framework needed to understand the phenomenon of monumentality in nineteenth-century music and culture. Rehding starts by pointing out some of the monumental effects in the music of composers such as Beethoven, Liszt, Brahms, Berlioz, Verdi, and Mahler. These effects are rarely theorized, he notes: monumentality is supposedly self-evident and decisively 'in your face,' which has proved an impediment to academic reflection on the subject. As noted in my introduction, we are faced with a similar impediment if we want to theorize monumentality in, and of, literature.

Formally, Rehding commences, the monumental aspect of the works of these composers resides in the duration and size of the compositions. The extraordinary scope of the compositions of Beethoven, Wagner, and Liszt can be explained by nineteenth-century changes in musical forms of representation, that were in turn made possible by technology. In opera, for instance, a growth in size and power of the orchestra opened up

possibilities for a wider range and larger-scale subjects (Halliwell 2005: 24). Consequently, a shift occurred from opera by numbers, consisting of neatly divided and rounded-off musical pieces, to compositions that were *durchkomponiert* (through-composed) from beginning to end. Wagner writes about this new *modus operandi* in *Oper und Drama* (1851). The first piece he fully composed this way was *Tristan und Isolde*, and later his *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (on which Wagner worked from 1848 to 1874), when he finally returned to it after a pause of 14 years. Henceforth, the libretto was composed without the interruptions of recitative and aria. What rendered Wagner's music drama's exceptionally voluminous was his combination of the extended symphony as inspired by Beethoven, with drama. The *Ring* cycle is arguably the most totalizing of all his enterprises, as it deals (according to Wagner as cited by George Bernard Shaw) with "the very essence and significance of the world in all its possible phases" (1981: 515).³⁰ Here, the combination of music with drama enabled the "stretching of melody" to "the full flood of Music's sea" (Wagner 1894: 337), resulting in a total duration of almost 15 hours. So in the late nineteenth century, under the influence of technological developments, Wagnerian music drama was notorious for posing an assault to the public's attention spans (as Beethoven did before him). In this respect, we can see the Romantic composer as a precursor of the monumental novel.

Because of this preference for outsize forms, Rehding further notes, the monumental is related to the 'colossal' and the 'monstrous'. Like the sublime, which exceeds the imagination and moves beyond representation, it transcends conventional conceptions of proportion and beauty (2009: 32). This relation holds true for today's monumental novels as well. Exactly what kind of sublime experience these texts occasion, is a question for my next chapter.

1.3.1 Socio-historical Context

Whereas duration, size, and a relation to the sublime are key characteristics of the case studies that will follow, there are other features of nineteenth-century monumentality that reoccur today in the novel and in the literary field at large. One such parallel comes to light in the societal context out of which monumentality emerged in Europe as a phenomenon of great cultural importance. The popularity of monuments increased dramatically as European societies underwent radical changes at a fast pace. Monuments were therefore erected to provide a counterweight to societies in flux, to offer a sense of stability amid social and technological changes. In Huyssen's words, monumentality

30 Moretti describes Wagner's operatic cycle as a "story which goes from the beginning of time to the last age, in four or five moves" (1996: 105), while Adorno has called it an artistic "encapsulation of the world process as a whole" (Adorno 1981: 101).

functioned as a “bulwark against the speed-up of time, the shifting grounds of urban space, the transitoriness of modern life” (1996: 192).³¹ In the midst of rapid industrial and political changes, commemorative sculptural and architectural works were erected to obtain a sense of cultural permanence: they “helped a nation in flux define itself, its relation to the past, and anticipated survival into the future” (Garval 2003: 83). In this quest for self-definition, European nations looked at their (idealized) past at the same time as projecting an utopian future. The memorial culture of nineteenth-century Europe was celebratory and affirmative (Rigney and Leerssen 2014: 10).

Artists played a significant part in stabilizing the collective identity of nations and cities in transformation. Whereas before that period, monuments were reserved for political rulers and military heroes, now they were increasingly erected for figures of the cultivated nation (*Bildungs- und Kulturnation*). The new heroes were writers, philosophers, and composers, elevated and put on the new pedestal of the cult of genius (Rehding 2009: 41). These geniuses—a status derived from the Kantian aesthetic of the sublime—were often immortalized through busts and statues during their lifetime, in “preposthumous” monuments unthinkable before that time.³² Cultural figures like Verdi occupied a “contested ground” between past and future, their statues tangible models for what the national arts would be able to achieve in a glorious future, erected at a time when that future was unpredictable (Vella 2013: 79; 88).

Along comparable lines, there rose in the literary field an ideal vision of the immortality of great writers and their works. In ““A Dream of Stone”: Fame, Vision, and the Monument in Nineteenth-Century French Literary Culture” (2003), Michael Garval gives an extensive overview of the rise of monumentality as an expression of literary fame in nineteenth-century France. A period marked by a feverish “statue-mania” cast

31 For instance: Francesca Vella, in her article “Verdi’s Don Carlo as Monument” (2013), explains how, in the context of Italy’s post-Unification urban renewal, an insistent phase of monument-building commenced, with its peak in the 1880s and 1890s. Italy’s wide-ranging plans for remodeling its cities—Vella takes Milan as an example—consisted of a rehearsal of the high points of the nation’s past as well as an attempt at renewal in order to turn Milan into an Italian capital of culture, progress, and industrialization (78). So in revamping the collective Milanese identity, preserving its past was just as important as projecting a vision of its future.

32 An ongoing database of monumental statues in Europe is currently developed by SPIN, the Study Platform on Interlocking Nationalisms. See <<http://www.spinnet.eu/statues>> and <<http://www.spinnet.eu/ui.p/statuary>>. In the greater context of Europe, this statue mania (*Denkmalwut* or *statuomanie*) included Shakespeare, Dante, Camões, Walter Scott, the Slovenian Prešeren and the Czech Mácha. Besides statues, the cult of the author manifested itself in centenaries, the practice of naming streets and squares after literary heroes, and the publication of monumental re-editions of the author’s work (Rigney and Leerssen 2014: 4).

in stone the figures of Honoré de Balzac, Victor Hugo, and Alexandre Dumas, to name a few.³³ As Garval argues, this popularity of literary figures as a choice for monuments was furthermore directly related to shifts in the media culture of the time. The nineteenth century was marked by a notable growth of the reading and viewing public, as well as an increase in the accessibility of media. The emergence of a large bourgeois audience of readers and viewers went together with a cascade of new media technologies such as lithography, photography, and mechanized printing. As a result of these changes, literary fame underwent a democratization, and celebrity became omnipresent yet fleeting: within closer reach of the common citizen, yet much harder to retain. Instead of diminishing the monument's appeal, as one might imagine, this democratization of fame only *enhanced* the traditional, commemorative role of monuments, rendering the stone statue all the more lasting by contrast: "although the spread of new visual and print media flooded a fame-hungry public with portrayals of the latest celebrities, the monument alone seemed a time-tested vehicle for lasting renown" (86). The transitory celebrity of the many was contrasted by the enduring glory of the few. Compensating the reality of an increasingly unstable, capricious, and money-driven marketplace of literature, the vision of the unity of writer, work, and monument was ultimately a nostalgic fantasy of the literary enterprise as unified and resilient. It offered a "powerful dream of purposefulness, solidity, and immutability – of an imagined, ideal world of letters that never was, and never would be" (91). Eternal glory, that is, as a fiction.

The practice came to an end due to the influence of the *avant-gardes* in the arts of the twentieth century. Iconoclastic movements like Dada and Surrealism brought about an awareness of the volatility of cultural and artistic movements and the evanescence of their products, and the belief in transcendence of genius finally gave way to an increasing skepticism (Garval 2003: 100). This attitude of anti-monumentalism that characterized the *avant-gardes* and modernism, and was carried over into the various postmodernisms, was also informed by the association of big, bombastic styles with the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century (Huyssen 1996: 189). After World War II, the emphasis in memorial culture shifted from the celebratory public monument to the commemoration of victims of the past through memorials (Rigney and Leerssen 2014: 10).³⁴ "What makes a monument suspect, even though

33 Where literary figures were concerned, in the majority of cases these statues were erected for poets: the cult of the writer did not apply to the novelist since at this time, the novel was not yet generally considered an art form.

34 French historian Jacques Le Goff, in his article "Documento/monumento" (1977), wrote that monuments from the end of the nineteenth century became suspect for positivist historians precisely because of their status as *intentional* objects of

it is often found *in situ*," Paul Ricoeur explains, "is its obvious finality, its commemoration of events that its contemporaries—especially the most powerful among them—judged worthy of being integrated into the collective memory" (1988: 116-19). The memorial is more democratic as it commemorates ordinary people and the everyday instead of an exclusive celebration of 'high points' and heroes. Within this context we can also understand the counter-monument, which emphasizes ephemerality rather than fixity and dispersal rather than concentration of memory (Young 1992).

In the face of the unpopularity of monumentality in the twenty-first century, Huyssen alludes to an all-too-crude division between a 'good' and a 'bad' branch of monumentality³⁵ that he seeks to nuance by arguing that monumentality is not a fixed notion. The monumental is subject to change. Different characteristics of the monumental gain dominance in different temporal and geographical contexts. So for each age, we should critically determine what monumentality entails.

If we leap to the present and compare the socio-cultural context of the emergence of today's monumental novels (a context I address in more detail in section 1.4) to the nineteenth century, we see that the monumental again attains importance in the face of societies and media in flux. Today, the transformations in the face of which the monumental manifests itself in literature include big data, the database, and the ethical challenges posed by globalization. As Manuel Castells's work (e.g. 2000) demonstrates, cultural production in general is deeply transformed by the shift in the West to a globalized network culture. It is this larger constellation of digitalization and globalization, I believe, that sparked the current investment of monumentality in literature. As noted, critics announce the 'death of the novel' as an expression of anxieties about a changing media-scape (marked by digitization, e-books, Internet, the database) and the role of the novel in this new continuum. The monumental heavyweights produced by authors like Knausgård, Danielewski, Bolaño, and Vollmann function as stabilizers, fixing the status and identity not of the nation, but of the genre in the face of these larger cultural transformations. These novels underscore their monumental potential as a counterweight to these changes, to offer a sense of stability for literature. One of the ways in which they do this, is by placing the author figure in the center of the literary enterprise (as I discuss at more length in subsection 1.3.3). This is in sharp contrast with the current increase in the accessibility of texts through digitization,

commemoration. Instead, historians favored the document, because of its seemingly objective and 'accidental' character, as evidence for historical facts.

35 The term 'bad nineteenth century' comes from Thomas Mann's essay "The Sorrows and Grandeur of Richard Wagner" ("Leiden und Größe Richard Wagners," 1933), published in *Pro and Contra Wagner*, 1985.

and the rise of an online 'participatory culture' in which creators and consumers of media engage in new interactions (Jenkins 2006: 3). Due to these transformations, literary authorship is now undergoing further democratization, and developing in the direction of collective authorship.

By exploding the novel's material form and incorporating new strategies of representation in an 'old' medium, Bolaño, Vollmann, Danielewski, and Knausgård engage with the question of what the novel can still do and be. These authors reinforce the difference between literary writing on the one hand, and the encompassing networks of online textual information on the other, as well as underscore the novel's ability to select the valuable and exclude the insignificant. The monumental novel stresses and inscribes what is special and what should be preserved of the literary novel and its readership. This way, a monument is erected for the novel or literature itself, rather than for a particular cultural identity in need of solidification.

1.3.2 Historical and Aesthetic Monumentality

Now that I have discussed the original context in which monumentality came about as a grand-scale cultural phenomenon, it is time to consider more closely the specific type of temporal experience that underlies it. Defining monumentality as "the imaginary link between musical bigness and greatness" (2009: 9), Rehding construes a theory that first differentiates, in order to better think together, the bigness of the monumental style of nineteenth-century music and the monument as an object of commemoration. To get there, he makes a distinction between two different types of magnitude: historical greatness on the one hand, linked to collective memory and identity formation, and physical size on the other, a "tendency to dramatic proportions or even lack of any proportionality" intended at inciting astonishment in the listener (27). These types of magnitude correspond to two dimensions of monumentality that come together in nineteenth-century music, and that Rehding calls historical and aesthetic monumentality. I will recapitulate these two categories here, since the distinction will make an important contribution to my understanding of the monumental strategies of paper-based novels in times of digital media and globalization.

Historical monumentality corresponds to the commemorative dimension of the monument, and is informed by curatorial issues of preservation. Alois Riegl has addressed the question of the monument in the context of the beginnings of modern museum culture in "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origins" (1982). In this essay, Riegl signaled a "cult of the historical monument" in the development of the notion of heritage, a phenomenon inextricably bound up with the rise of a new conception of historicity. This conception holds that

[e]verything that has been and is no longer we call historical, in accordance with the modern notion that what was can never be again, and . . . everything that has been constitutes an irreplaceable and irremovable link in a chain of development. (21)

In this evolutionary frame, any object, regardless of its intrinsic value, becomes worthy of being collected and preserved, because each object stands as a fragment to history as a larger whole. Assmann denotes this historical approach as the 'archive,' "the passively stored memory that preserves the past past" (as opposed to the canon, "the actively circulated memory that keeps the past present") (2008: 98). The archive, in this sense, entails the expansion of cultural memory, as an inclusive reservoir in opposition to the selective canon. It is in this historical or archival dimension that the monument comes closest to notions of the remnant, the trace and the ruin. The worthless is imbued with value when looked at through the lens of the historian: the process of selection and preservation is one of valuation. Even the most insignificant scrap of paper could achieve the status of an object of commemoration. According to Rehding, Riegl's theory thereby exemplifies the historical side of monumentality, as it "approaches the fundamental question of who we are by telling us where we come from. It instructs us simply to look backwards for an answer" (2009: 27).

Walter Benjamin's work is paradigmatic for this particular take on history. In his *Passagenwerk* (1927-1940), Benjamin emphasized the fleeting nature of the present moment as embodied in the ruins of modernity. He does so through a close reading of the traces of the disintegrated past as they are still contained in the world of the present. Like Riegl's, Benjamin's historical-materialist position insists that the past is constructed by the present and has no separate, objective existence outside of our rear-view perspective. Consequently, it must be read *in* and *through* this present: "Historicism gives the "eternal" image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past" (Benjamin 1999c: 254). In tracing a non-teleological history of fragments and remnants of earlier ages as contained in the present, Benjamin engages in an act of historical monumentality. In this respect, he is a forerunner of the preservative or 'archival' tendencies in the monumental novels that I analyze in the following chapters.

In these novels, the temporality of historical monumentality is present as an unwillingness to select a small number of themes, characters, or events deemed important enough to preserve. Instead, they include lists and enumerations, and employ the anaphoric singulative mode of narration as well as a general composition marked by 'interminability' and expansion. As such, these works are informed by a drive to store or record not only the 'high points' or most important figures of their

subject matter, but rather ‘everything,’ or at least gesture towards such a posture. Amounting to a democratic and non-hierarchical mode of representation, these ‘archival’ strategies in the works of Danielewski, Bolaño, Knausgård, and Vollmann produce effects of historical monumentality, resulting in a more inclusive form of representation that refuses to select and compress.

In contrast, Rehding’s second category, aesthetic monumentality, pays no heed to this dimension of the past, but rather emphasizes the monument’s immediate effect in the present. It seeks to incite, through stylistic grandeur and a display of power, an ‘awesome terror’ that is closely related to the sublime. Yet in contrast with the indeterminacy of the sublime, aesthetic monumentality answers the question of identity by “reassuring us of our greatness and our lasting ability to overcome the challenges of others” (2009: 28). In other words, the artistic excellence of aesthetic monumentality holds a promise of longevity, or even immortality: it inspires confidence in an everlasting future. This is the monumentality of architectural structures such as obelisks, pyramids, temples, memorials, and burial towers, erected to guarantee permanence. In contrast to the historical dimension of monumentality, aesthetic monumentality insists on the absoluteness and eternal validity of the greatness of the past. It is this aesthetic notion of monumental history that Friedrich Nietzsche has critiqued in the second part of his *Untimely Meditations* (1874), titled “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” precisely for its underlying premises of universality:

That the great moments in the struggle of the human individual constitute a chain, that this chain unites mankind across the millennia like a range of human mountain peaks, that the summit of such long-ago moments shall be forever still living, bright and great—that is the fundamental idea of the faith of humanity, which finds its expression in the demand for a monumental history. (1997: 68)

Monumental history insists on the continuity of (artistic) greatness and the repeatability of past successes as a bulwark against change and transitoriness.³⁶ Nietzsche critically envisions it as a succession of transcendent moments of greatness that link mankind across millennia

36 Bolaño’s *2666* thematizes the circular conception of the repeatability of past literary greatness by way of a publisher who, seeking to reinstall his belief in literature after the second World War, muses that “some of the new ones weren’t bad, even if among them no glimpse could be seen (or Mr. Bubis was incapable of catching a glimpse, as he himself acknowledged) of a new Döblin, a new Musil, a new Kafka (although if a new Kafka appeared, said Mr Bubis, laughing, but with a look of profound sadness in his eyes, I would quake in my boots), a new Thomas Mann.” (808).

in an eternal hall of fame (69). In order to convey this eternal greatness, monumental history necessarily disregards the fundamental differences between present and past, and ignores principles of *causality*. After all, ignoring the historical causes that led to monumental achievements in the first place is the only way to sustain the illusion of this transcendent and timeless greatness. Nietzsche therefore calls this conception of history—with a term borrowed from Wagner’s *Oper und Drama* (1851: 158-60)³⁷—a collection of “effects in themselves” [*eine Wirkung, die ohne Ursache ist*]. In its disregard of causality, monumental history is harmful to the past, since

whole segments of it are forgotten, despised, and flow away in an uninterrupted colourless flood, and only individual embellished facts rise out of it like islands: the few personalities who are visible at all have something strange and unnatural about them, like the golden hip which the pupils of Pythagoras supposed they saw on their master. (Nietzsche 1997: 71)

As Rehding points out, this transcendent type of monumental history entails a particular mode of *narration*: it fictionalizes history and creates a mythical past by singling out a number of high points and erasing their contexts and causes. And, since it insists on the repeatability of great deeds of the past in the present, it is a *cyclical* narrative that is told here.³⁸

In this respect it is significant that Nietzsche in the above-cited fragment employs the metaphor of the mountain range, an image that has often been used in nineteenth-century accounts of (musical) monumentality (Rehding 2009: 29). This metaphor is particularly effective since it takes the temporal differences between the ‘greatest’ composers and places them in the spatial realm, thus implying that timeless genius is contemporary. The image allows for the individual peaks to be dissimilar, yet to exist in the same range. This way, two types of magnitude can be brought together: “the overwhelming physical size of the mountains is metaphorically transferred into colossal artistic or historical greatness” (30). This then suggests that the high points of human achievement are as lasting as the mountains themselves, representative

37 Whereas Wagner used the term *Effekt* to criticize an empty, showy display of bombastic effects in the monumental music that he derided, Nietzsche employs it for a critique of monumental history, as denoting an a-historical, universal sense of everlasting greatness (See Rehding 2009:54).

38 In the nineteenth century, this cyclical dimension to monumental time informed the yearly festivals and centennials and other commemorative rituals that celebrated monumental artists. These rituals served to create patterns of continuity and repetition across time within a world in rapid transformation, and were aimed at the high points of the calendar year instead of the everyday. (Rigney and Leerssen 2014: 7)

of eternal validity: a historical model of genius is combined with a suggestion of timelessness. Mountain ranges belong to the stock images of the sublime which, as said, is closely related to the monumental. Whereas the sublime surpasses the imagination and moves into the realm beyond representation, the monumental, with its associations of the monstrous and the colossal, surpasses conventional conceptions of beauty and proportion. As I address below, this connection has implications for how nineteenth-century music theorists envisioned the *creators* of monumental works as well, to whom connotations of the monstrous and the superhuman were metonymically transferred. This practice resonates in the presentation of twenty-first-century novelists like Bolaño and Vollmann.

In the light of these constructions, Rehding points to the importance of being aware that in singling out and monumentalizing a selection of deeds and figures for posterity, there are always invisible hands at work (2009: 37). Heroes and villains, the terrible and the monstrous are assigned their roles and then blown up out of proportion. The masses of people, without whom these figures could never have come into existence in the first place, are erased and lost in the valleys between the mountain peaks (or, in Bolaño's words, the "garbage pit of history," 2008: 228³⁹). This historical selection increases the superhuman power attributed to this individual, rendering the author even more monstrous. The act of erasure is at the heart of the constitution of all monuments, as will be elaborated in the next chapter.⁴⁰

The aesthetic dimension of the monumental novel's temporality furthermore resides in their aspect of narrative totalization, that is to say, the binding of the plot in a beginning, middle, and end-structure. This is a characteristic of all narrative plots, aimed at encapsulating and synthesizing the novelistic material. Totalization goes against the archival drive to preserve 'everything,' since it makes selection and distinction inevitable. In the case of my corpus, there is an added sense of totalization since the 'enclosed' character of these works is reinforced by their use of the geometrical forms of circles, ellipses, and the palindrome

39 Vollmann in *Europe Central* (2005) writes of "the crematorium of history" (EC: 737). As will become clear, the authors selected for this study reflect on the creation of monumentality thematically and well as performing it structurally and formally.

40 There are also invisible hands at work in the monumental art work itself, which inspires awe through its effects that seem to be without cause. A case in point is Wagner's decision to put the orchestra at Bayreuth in a pit under the stage (the *mystische Abgrund*), literally rendering their playing hands invisible. This enabled Wagner to sustain the illusion of boundlessness, so that the audience forgets the fact that it is sitting in the auditorium and "lives and breathes now only in the artwork which seems to it as Life itself, and on the stage which seems the wide expanse of the whole World" (Wagner 2006:86). For their *Wirkung ohne Ursache*, in order to carry out their pseudo-organic effects, Wagner's music drama's rely heavily upon mechanization (Smith 2007: 3).

as structuring principles. In their bounded forms, they trace an orb around the territory they describe: a circle. The circle is arguably the most monumental of forms, embodying a perfect self-enclosure. Each of the novels I focus on in the following chapters includes an element of circular temporality. *My Struggle* showcases the eternal return of mundane activities and daily chores. *2666*, I will argue, critically comments on aesthetic monumentality through the anticipated arrival of the giant, neoromantic author-figure Archimboldi, who is expected to synthesize the fragmented story-world. Moreover, the ending of this novel takes place before its beginning. And, to name one last example, Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* (as its title reflects) makes the cyclical into its central formal-material principle of construction, thus allowing its characters to remain out of the grip of linear, historical time and mythologize themselves in a circular, 'timeless' temporality.

When we zoom out and consider the critical reception of these authors, aesthetic monumentality also describes a close-circuited literary industry that casts Vollmann in the role of a modern-day Tolstoy (Thorne 2006), redresses Bolaño as a reincarnation of Arthur Rimbaud (cf. Pollack 2009: 358), and lets Proust relive in Knausgård (De la Durantaye 2013). Thus, a circular success story is told, of the repeatability of past literary greatness in the present.⁴¹

I must remind readers that this heritage model, in its insistence on force and magnitude, is decisively coded along gender lines. In monumental history it is often the female figures that are erased, whereas their male associates are put upon the high peaks of the mountain range (a theme that will recur in my reading of Bolaño's *2666* in the next chapter). Where monuments are concerned there is a prevailing connection between miniature forms (such as the pixelated monument and the *Stolperstein* or 'stumbling block') and femininity (Hirsch and Spitzer 375-76; Brownmiller 1984). In *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (1993), Susan Stewart describes the miniature as a "metaphor for the interior space and time of the bourgeois subject," while the gigantic is a metaphor for "the abstract authority of the state and the collective, public, life" (xii). That the totalizing ambition of 'conquering time and space' in the epic novel is still connoted with the masculine is underwritten by the fact that genre studies on big novels have almost exclusively focused on male authors.⁴² Moreover, this gendered

41 Vollmann, expressing his veneration for "fat books" like *War and Peace*, *The Tale of Genji*, *Black Lamb and Gray Falcon*, *Remembrance of Things Past*, and *Moby-Dick*, makes such an argument of aesthetic monumentality by adding himself to these 'mountain tops': "I believe, rightly or wrongly, that I possess enough talent and skill that at least some of my books deserve provisional admittance to the Society of Fat Books" (2004b: 320).

42 Ercolino, who does acknowledge the "thorny problem" of the inclusion of "women or minority writers" (2014: 9) in his book on maximalist novels, includes 16 male authors

connotation resonates in categories like ‘masterpiece’ (Damrosch 2013) and ‘masterwork’ (LeClair 1989). David Foster Wallace has made this connection explicit by referring to himself, Vollmann, Richard Powers and Jonathan Franzen as the school of “white male novelists over six feet” (qtd. in LeClair 1996a: 30), suggesting that big masculine authors write big books.

Evidently, the association in Western thought of the masculine with big, public, permanent monuments on the one hand, and the feminine with small, personal, ephemeral forms of writing on the other, is still felt in literary criticism and production (see Miller 2009). Rather than weaken this gendered dimension by forcedly adding a female writer to my case studies, I will acknowledge the masculine coding of monumentality and make it part of my critical readings of these works. Thus, we will see that the strategies of preserving ‘everything’ within the expansive structures of these novels, often amounts to collecting and archiving the feminine as an elusive quality the authors seek to fixate and objectify in writing. Among the many aspects of Romanticism that relive in the novels of Vollmann, Danielewski, Bolaño, and Knausgård, I will point out the tradition of the ‘eternal feminine’ (das *Ewig-Weibliche*, see Goethe 2014; cf. Gilbert and Gubar 1979: 599-609). My reading of such masculinist residues of Romanticism in innovative literary works of today will reveal, and raise critical awareness of, the lingering gendered assumptions still present in literary monumentality.

Clearly, both historical and aesthetic monumentality exhibit persistence and suggest durability: one by surviving over generations through commemorations and traditions, the other through grandiloquence and the sheer force of art. Whereas historical monumentality insists on the singularity of each historical object of commemoration, the circular conception of history underlying aesthetic monumentality makes a claim for the eternal greatness and repeatability of monumental high marks. By carrying within itself both dimensions, the monumental simultaneously looks forward and backward; it has one eye at the past and one at the future (Rehding 2009: 30). Once again, Wagner here serves as a clear example of this temporal bi-directionality. Born out of a discontent with contemporary art and society, his purported mission in *The Artwork of the Future* (1849) was to theorize the “total work of art,” unifying the “three primeval sisters” of “*Tanz-, Ton- und Ticht-Kunst*,”⁴³ and binding together all of the German people

and one female, Zadie Smith. As Kiron Ward remarks in his review essay, the case for her inclusion as a maximalist writer is never fully made (2015: 8). One of Ercolino’s sources of inspiration, Tom LeClair’s book on ‘masterworks,’ includes 6 male authors and one female (Ursula K. Le Guin). Moretti’s *Modern Epic* only discusses works by male authors.

43 Wagner’s alliterative choice of formulation of the trinity is not purely rhetorical: “If wont or fashion permitted us to take up again the old and genuine style of speech, and

or Volk (2006: 132). Importantly, though, the union thus effected would in fact be a *re-union*, for the music drama would hereby once again conform to the spirit of Greek tragedy. Wagner thus sketched a future for his art that was predicated on the past, in the cyclical move characteristic of aesthetic monumentality. Franco Moretti has remarked upon this double temporality in Wagner's *Ring* cycle: "semi-archaic and semi-advanced. Non-contemporaneity operates with such force here as almost to break the Ring in two: *mythical* content, and music of the *future*" (1996: 117).

By combining in a single art-work the singularity of historical monumentality with the eternal greatness and repeatability of monumental 'high marks,' or the linear and interminable with the circular and rounded-off, the monumental novels I analyze are characterized by a similar Janus-faced logic of bi-directionality. They have one eye at literature's past and one at its future. Thus, Bolaño's *2666* looks forward to a globalized, apocalyptic world marked by fractured human relations and an overload of big data, but it does so by revisiting the eighteenth century experience of the sublime. Knausgård reinvents the autobiographical novel through strategies of quantification that are currently pervasive in social media, thus making the novel new for the future. He does so, however, in an attempt to retrieve lost moments that revisits Proust's mission in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. As for Vollmann and Danielewski, they create inventive book-forms in order to materialize an experience of living in a radically immanent world of late globalization, which knows no 'beyond,' and to reimagine the age-old trope of the book-as-world. The monumental novel, as the following chapters will make clear, simultaneously looks forward and backward. It can only sketch a future for literature that is predicated on the past.

Moreover, as the next section conveys, their effects of monumentality are not restricted to the novels themselves, but they are carried over to the authors, who are monumentalized along with their works. Paradoxically they are thereby immortalized during their lives, due to the ways in which they present themselves and are presented by the literary industry.

1.3.3 The Artist as a Monument

In his article "Liszt's Musical Monuments" (2002), Rehding discusses the inextricable connection of the artist's creation and his or her biography as the basis of nineteenth-century criticism (53). The most

write instead of "*Dichten*" "*Tichten*"; then should we gain in the group of names for the three primeval human arts, "*Tanz-, Ton- und Ticht-kunst*" (Dance, Tone, and Poetry), a beautiful word-picture of the nature of this trinity of sisters, namely a perfect *Stabreim*, such as is native to the spirit of our language." (2006: 132)

famous example in this line of criticism, conflating the composer's life with his artistic production, is a reversal suggested by Paul Bekker in 1924. This music critic claimed that Wagner did not write *Tristan und Isolde* as inspired by his real-life affair with Mathilde Wesendonck, but that it was exactly the other way around: he started this affair *because* he was working on *Tristan*.⁴⁴ In line with this linkage of life and work, monumentality was rarely ascribed exclusively to the elements intrinsic to a composition. Rehding in this respect writes of "the "Midas touch" that the machinations of monumentality exercise and that is capable of extending its qualities to everything within its reach" (2009: 32). In practice, this Midas touch often hit the composer himself at full-force. Monumentality concerned great cultural acts or *tours de force*, whose creators were seen as superhuman heroes, larger than life. Thus, Garval writes, the nineteenth-century vision of literary greatness in France was also characterized by an identification between writers and monuments, flesh and stone: "*l'homme et l'oeuvre* were construed as indissociable. . . . Great writers become their work, live on through them" (2003: 89). The great writer seemed to fuse with the monument, seeming literally to become what Nora has called a *lieu de mémoire* or site of memory (1997). Literary glory was envisioned as an ideal synthesis of writer, oeuvre and monument:

The collective "vision" of literary figures, of their works, and of literary fame in general, combined authorial self-fashioning and a broader societal construction, . . . with complex patterns of harmony and dissonance, consensus and contradiction, between the documentary and the imaginary, life and art, image and text. (Garval 2003: 87)

From this period onwards, artists started to fashion their own persona, and were increasingly aware of themselves as constructs modeled after the self-made dandy (90).

Furthermore, in these collective visions of the author as a monument there were certain recurrent characteristics in the way the author was (self-)presented. Because of a Romantic sensibility that was slowly permeating social consciousness, the preferred heroes of the day were solitary artists, whom society had neglected during their lives. Suffering, poverty, and tragedy were considered proof of these artists' worthiness of this posthumous apotheosis. As Mathijsen writes, highly favored was the doomed, Promethean, struggling writer: a martyr of literary creation whose art is created at great costs for himself (2013: 273). The monumentalization of such writers held a promise of eternal glory

44 Paul Bekker, *Wagner: Das Leben im Werke*. Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1924. 320-24, qtd. in Rehding 2002: 53.

in triumph over death, which is linked to the Christian notion of the funerary monument.

In the (self-)presentation of the writers under study, this notion of a funerary monument (albeit, with the exception of Bolaño, pre-posthumous) and of the (self-)monumentalization of the author has returned in all its Romantic splendor. First, it is remarkable that we rarely find an essay, review, or article on the works of Bolaño, Knausgård, and Vollmann,⁴⁵ which does not share information about their lives and bring it into relation with their works.⁴⁶ Indeed, their personal lives seem to be inseparable from their monumental endeavors: critics study their life stories for clues as to what has made them embark upon such enormous projects. And the authors contribute to this project themselves as well, inside and outside their works (recall my earlier mention of Vollmann's childhood trauma involving his immersion in a book while his sister was drowning). As I will note in the chapters devoted to them, Bolaño, Vollmann, and Knausgård each have their own 'originary myths,' that are reiterated time and again and that contribute to their authorial aggrandizement.

Second, in these mythical renditions—part fact, part fiction—the authors are represented as larger than life figures capable of superhuman deeds. As Sarah Pollack has remarked, Bolaño is consistently presented in criticism as “a cross between the beats and Arthur Rimbaud,” his life a “tragedy of mythical proportions . . . already the stuff of legend” (2009: 358). Likewise, Vollmann has been called a “hero in the tragic sense of that word” (Rebein 2001: 64) with a “larger-than-life persona,” whose biography, “[s]et beside the lives of his contemporaries ensconced in the unobjectionably attractive stability of writing-program appointments, . . . has long seemed the stuff of legend” (Gibbons 2005). And Knausgård, finally, is validated by fellow writer Jonathan Lethem as no less than a “living hero who landed on greatness by abandoning every typical literary feint, an emperor whose nakedness surpasses royal finery” (2014). In particular, all three persona are habitually associated with

45 This is not the case for Danielewski, who is more media-genic and generally the most 'modern' or contemporary of these authors. This author frequently does interviews and even makes trailers for his books. Although with *Only Revolutions* he wanted to “write a book that cannot exist online” (Cottrell 2011), moreover, he is most openly in tune with new media and technology.

46 Especially where Vollmann is concerned, critics often remark on this inseparability of biography and oeuvre (Rebein 2001: 60; Coffman 2014: 10-11). As we will see in the chapter on Knausgård, his life and writing are impossible to consider apart from each other: not only because his writing is autobiographical, but also because the publication of his series affects his life drastically, which in turn becomes the topic of his writing. Chris Andrews has made the same point about Bolaño, stating that to be curious about the interrelations between the author figure within, and the writer outside his oeuvre is “not necessarily to be under a naïve illusion” (2014: x).

danger and risk, with extreme behavior.⁴⁷ Thus we are served an image of an autonomous individual who struggles to maintain a sense of authenticity in a literary establishment revolving around media-stardom and economic interests.

Third, and finally, in all three case studies, the monumental is rehearsed in the notion of the funerary monument. It comes back in the idea that the artist suffers for his art, and in the image of an artist who sacrifices himself for an immense undertaking. Thus Bolaño's last writing years were a race against death, as he allegedly valued finishing *2666* over liver surgery. In an essay published in 1998, Vollmann relates how writing for the most part of the day without breaks for years on end has given him carpal tunnel: "Writing is bad for me physically, without a doubt, but what would I do if I stopped?" (110). And for Knausgård the publication of his autobiographical novels has come with an enormous sacrifice, since the larger part of his social circle has condemned him for the exposure of their personal lives; for him, writing came with the cost of an even graver sense of isolation. In all three cases, moreover, the Romantic vision of the suffering artist is not limited to descriptions of the writer outside of his works, if only because there hardly *is* an 'outside' to their works. Their monumentality partly resides in a lack of a clear dividing line between life and work. For this reason, I will consider this biographical aspect of (self-)representation in the chapters that follow insofar as it resonates into the novels under study. At all times, I strive to remain critical about these, often romanticized, life stories in order to determine how they serve to produce a rhetoric of monumentality. Often, they propel an image of the author as a belated figure to create a sense of authenticity and suggest a more forceful import for his works. In reality, there are of course many invisible hands at work to create the monumentality of these authors, such as their readers, publishers, agents, and media—all instances that they often manifestly oppose or against which they express their disregard.

47 Cases in point are Bolaño's alleged heroin addiction and imprisonment during the Pinochet coup. Michael Hemmingson describes Vollmann, with his obsession with prostitution and war, and the FBI's aforementioned suspicion that he might be the Unabomber, as the "writer as a larger-than-life-editorial-man-of-action. . . . risking life and limb, courting misfortune in nations whose populaces hate Americans, exploring icy regions of the world not friendly to the human body, hanging out with whores, pimps, drug dealers, the dispossessed and delusional" (2009: xvi). Last, Knausgård courts risk by publishing painful details about his own life and those of his family, and through his self-forged association with Hitler and Anders Breivik, the perpetrator of the gruesome attacks in Norway in 2011. The thematic insistence on risk in these authors' works and biographies is closely connected to the masculine characteristics of the monumental novel.

1.3.4 A monument to the novel

My assessment clarifies that the idea of the text as a monument and the classification of literature as ‘monumental’. When thought together, they imply both preservation and veneration, and include the author as well. In the end, it is the literary novel itself that is thus monumentalized. This seemingly celebratory project entails an ambiguous stance towards posterity. To approach the text as a monument obviously implies that writing—especially literary writing, which has traditionally been expected to be of a lasting, resilient nature—is a medium that can be used to save persons and events from oblivion. To monumentalize holds a judgment of valuation: naturally, if you create a monument for something, you consider it worth the trouble, often even exceptionally valuable. But since a monument is also an *aide-mémoire*, a weapon against forgetfulness, this suggests a certain vulnerability of the thing that is commemorated: without the help of matter or text, this thing could someday vanish from collective memory. When it is the literary novel itself that is thus preserved against the omnipresence of new media, the novel as monument is intended as a bulwark against *its own death*. By revisiting the monumental ambitions of the nineteenth century between the covers of the novel in an age marked by digitalization, authors like Vollmann, Danielewski, Bolaño, and Knausgård attempt to preserve the novel for generations to come.

We find ourselves, therefore, back at the ‘death of the novel’ and at threats of dwindling attention spans and problems of valuation. If the argument I have construed so far seems circular, it is because the idea of the monumental is based on a circular logic. This becomes clearest in the last chapter on Danielewski’s *Only Revolutions* (2006) as a monument to the book which makes this circularity into its central material ordering principle. In the words of the poet Jean Paul, a monument is a work of art on a work of art (1936). This tautology is exemplified by Ben Jonson’s poem “To the Memory of My Beloved, The Author, Mr. William Shakespeare, And What He Hath Left Us” (1623): “Thou art a monument without a tomb, / And art alive still while thy book doth live, / And we have wits to read, and praise to give” (qtd. in Bennett and Royle 2004: 42). The tautological logic underlying the monument consists of posing a response to changing times by affirming the grandness of the nation, culture or art form, assuring its proliferation in the future. But if the phenomenon thus monumentalized is truly so grand and important, it does not need a monument. Or, as Jean Paul has famously expressed this paradox: “What does a monument want? Impossible to lend immortality—because each [monument] already presupposes [immortality]. It is not the canopy [*Thronhimmel*] that carries Atlas but the giant who carries the sky [*Himmel*]” (qtd. in Rehding 2002: 159).⁴⁸

48 “Was will überhaupt ein Denkmal? Unmöglich, Unsterblichkeit geben—denn jedes

Conversely, since the truly great is in no need of praise, an act of monumentalization would give rise to suspicions that prominence is lacking in the monument's object. Today, we see this tautology in the anxieties arising from changes in media, that lead to the production of monumental effects in the novel, thereby foregrounding literature's uncertain future.

So far I have teased out the logic informing monumentality in contemporary literature, arguing it consists of a double temporality, in the way that these works pose a reaction to current transformation in media and society, and in the monumentalization of the authors along with their oeuvres. But what exactly are the technological and social transformations that bring the novel to foreground its monumental potential today? Among possible answers, I single out the rise of big data, the relation between database and narrative, and the ethical challenges of globalization. I then conclude this chapter by introducing the most important devices and strategies that the monumental novels employ in response to these developments.

1.4 The Technocultural Context of the Monumental Today

1.4.1 Big data

As established earlier, the novel survives its own announced 'death' time and again by adapting to social and technological changes in the life-world of which it is a part. These changes, as we have seen, include transformations of the media-scape surrounding literature. One recent development in media that influences the scale of representations is the rise of 'big data'. This term represents an increase in the volumes of data we can store, process, and transmit (petabytes), but also, and more importantly, a shift in the way we deal with data. Before, working with big sets of information required a certain measure of sampling. Today, a so-called 'N=all' approach prevails, which means taking the whole dataset without making a selection (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013: 29).

The new possibilities for scale brought about by digitalization have led to a wide-spread cultural drive to capture and preserve 'everything'. Data theorists like Viktor Mayer-Schönberger and Kenneth Cukier believe that datafication, "taking information about all things under the sun—including ones we never used to think of as information at all ... and transforming it into a data format to make it quantified," enables us to unlock the implicit, latent value of information (2013: 15). In *The Googlization of Everything* (2011), Siva Vaidhyanathan argues

setzt eine voraus und nicht der Thronhimmel trägt den Atlas, sondern der Riese den Himmel" (1836)

that datafication is an inherently limitless process that has important consequences for our memorial practices:

For most of human history, forgetting has been the default and remembering the challenge. Chants, songs, books, libraries, and even universities were established primarily to overcome our propensity to forget. These aids to memory had physical and economic limitations that in fact served us well. All these technologies of memory also act as filters or editors. They help us remember much by discarding even more. Today, digital information storage and retrieval have made remembering the default state of knowledge and forgetting the accident or exception. (178)

This triumph of remembering over forgetting is closely connected to another aspect of big data: within this new approach to information, correlation becomes more important than causality (Aiden and Michel 2013: 42). This shift is part of a longer series of developments of increasing unease with narrative as a way of ordering the world, that we could ascribe to technological post-humanism (Ernst 2013a). In the words of Vilém Flusser, “A new form of thinking based on digital codes directs itself against procedural ‘progressive’ ideologies, to replace them with structural, systembased, cybernetic moments of thought” (qtd. in Ströhl 2002). The postmodern critique of narrative in historical discourse, following Hayden White’s *Metahistory* (1978), has inspired reflections on alternative ways of writing media in time. Increasingly, scholars are becoming aware of viable alternatives to narrative. Wolfgang Ernst, for example, reminds us that telling is not just about stories but also about counting, the mode of writing of digital media:

Early medieval forms of registering events (in the annalistic tradition as opposed to chronicles and historiography proper) convey a way of experiencing reality in terms of not continuous but discrete time, thus closer to state-based automata with discrete writing or reading of symbols on an endless memory tape – which is, of course, the diagram of the Turing machine. (2013b: 30)

Because of these changes in the ways we handle information and conceive of representation, the cultural significance of the database has markedly increased during the last decades. This is a second current influence on the monumental novel that I mentioned earlier, but should consider here at more length.

1.4.2 Narrative versus database

Media theorist Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media* (2001) has sparked an ongoing debate about narrative versus database as dominant forms in culture. Manovich states that as a cultural form, the database marks a "new way to structure our experience of ourselves and of the world" (219). Once, this role as primary meaning-making apparatus was reserved for narrative. In the computer age, Manovich points out, the database has replaced narrative as the symbolic form through which we make sense of the world around us: "After the novel, and subsequently cinema, privileged narrative as the key form of cultural expression of the modern age, the computer age introduces its correlate – the database" (218).

Both narrative and database function as basic models allowing us to make meaning out of the world, as Manovich has it, but there are some important differences between the two. Narrating entails exclusions and restrictive conditions: it is the outcome of a certain economy in selecting what is to be included in the contents of a story (see Genette 1980: 11). We could call this a symbolic or synecdochal logic, in which certain items in a narrative (themes, characters, events) are meant to stand for other items. When asked to tell our life story, for instance, we tend not to include every single person we have ever met, only the most important ones. In other words, a narrative structure results from selection, which implies a hierarchical process of valuation. For the archive on the other hand, and even more so the database as its digital counterpart,⁴⁹ this compression is less inevitable. As Manovich writes, the database is more inclusive, less discriminatory than narrative: no selection is necessary, no items need to be made exemplary for others (220).

To explain how this works, he discusses the difference between paradigm and syntagm as the two structural dimensions of all sign systems. The syntagm is, simply put, a combination of signs. In language, for instance, a speaker produces an utterance by threading together one element after another in a linear sequence. The paradigmatic dimension is the set of all elements of a certain type from which the speaker can choose. In language, all nouns form such a set, and all synonyms of a

49 Archive and database are often conflated, but they are not the same. Whereas 'archive' usually denotes an actual space as the material and physical container of records, the database is its electronic variant that exists digitally. Most importantly, unlike the traditional archives, databases are structured according to modular principles, meaning that all their elements can be regrouped in any thinkable way (Brouwer en Mulder 2003: 5). The result is a simultaneity of connections. As Ed Folsom further differentiates the two, the archive, besides physicality, suggests "idiosyncratic arrangement [and] partiality." By contrast, he links the database to "virtuality, endless ordering and reordering, and wholeness". Thus, even if they do share a desire for completeness, the information they contain differs qualitatively: "[t]here will always be more physical information in an archive than in a database, just as there will always be more malleable and portable information in a database than in an archive" (Folsom 1575-76).

particular word form another set. The elements in the syntagmatic dimension are related *in praesentia*, while elements in the paradigmatic dimension are related *in absentia*. This is how a narrative sequence is structured: the paradigm, which is the database of selections out of which a narrative is built, remains implicit, whereas the narrative resulting from it is explicit (231). New media, however, has reversed this relationship. Here the paradigm is materially present: interactive interfaces, for instance, present the user with a complete, explicit menu of all available choices. The syntagm, the 'narrative' or string of subsequent choices actually made, is dematerialized and therefore loses its privilege. This results in a move from temporal to spatial presentations in media. Narrative, bound as it is to the linear order of language through syntax, is a temporal technology. By contrast, data sets and databases lend themselves to spatial displays (Hayles 2005a: 180).

Another, related, difference is that between the finite and the potentially infinite. Narrative amounts to a cause-and-effect trajectory with a beginning, middle, and end-structure. The organizing principle of narrative is the plot, a structure of relationships by which the events narrated are given meaning. Closure is of vital importance, since the ending of the story drives the narrative. The end serves as a point from which the meaning of beginning and middle can be determined (Brooks 1984). For the database, by contrast, closure in any real sense is impossible. It represents the world as a list of items without beginning or end, and every item possesses the same significance as any other (Manovich 218). It is always possible to add a new element to the list. In *Archive Fever* (*Mal d'archive*, 1995), Derrida emphasizes how the archive is radically open-ended (68). The digital database is therefore potentially (depending on its space for memory storage) infinite—the epitome of the archive.

This potential for unlimited combination and recombination of particulars, finally, is what has led media theorists to pit narrative and database against each other in a story of competition. Thus Manovich provocatively states that "database and narrative are natural enemies. Competing for the same territory of human culture, each claims an exclusive right to make meaning out of the world." (2001: 225).⁵⁰ Ed Folsom follows this suggestion, insisting that databases threaten to "displace narrative, to infect and deconstruct narrative endlessly, to make it retreat behind the database or dissolve back into it, to become finally its own sprawling genre" (2007: 1577). This would imply that

50 Manovich's binary logic and the simplified conception of 'narrative' that underlies it have been subjected to critique, for instance in the special issue of *PMLA* published in 2007, on the "Genre of the Database." See f.i. Jerome McGann's essay "Database, Interface, and Archival Fever" and Katherine Hayles' "Narrative and Database: Natural Symbionts" in that issue.

narratives, along with their selective and partial representations of the world, are rendered obsolete by the engulfing scope of the database.

But in practice, the relation between the two modes of organization is rather characterized by mutual inspiration (Hayles 2007; Vesna 2007; Veel 2011; Pressman 2014). As Manovich himself readily admits, database and narratives “produce endless hybrids” (2001: 234). The monumental effects of the novels under study are a case in point: they are brought about by a renegotiation between narrative structures on the one hand, and the ordering principles of archive or database on the other. Feedback from the database here informs and transforms narrative strategies.

Narrative is not disappearing but its status in culture at large is changing, and as a result it indeed has a more modest role today. It is no longer the sole encompassing model we apply to the world, but rather one of many structures that coexist: “the interpretive possibilities proliferate as databases increase . . . In contrast to global dynamics, narrative at the local level remains pervasive, albeit more and more infused by data” (Hayles 2005a: 181; 182). That narrative would be fully replaced is unlikely, Hayles adds, since it is needed as the ‘other’ to the database’s ontology, as an alternative perspective that invests the formal logic of its operations with (human) meaning. Data is useless without interpretation, and narrative with its causal structure offers precisely that: it enables us to ask “[w]hat it means that Whitman, say, used a certain word 298 times in *Leaves of Grass* while using another word only 3 times” (178). Another affordance of narrative that Hayles stresses is its connection to otherness, the not-yet-determined. In databases, everything needs to be determined: unknown information cannot be contained. Narrative, on the other hand, gestures toward, and invites the unknown that resides beyond the brink of classification (183).

As the case studies in the next chapters will demonstrate, all the differences I have outlined here are blurred in the hybrid ordering principles of the novels I analyze. The monumental effects of these works are caused by a productive tension between narrative and the database as modes of representation, with each their own principles of organization.

1.4.3 Ethical challenges of globalization

Last, monumental novels increase this scope of record because of the ethical challenges posed to literary representations by globalization. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have diagnosed our late-global situation in terms of a collapse between the (spatial and conceptual) division of the world in an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’ domain (2000: 187). Within this context, today’s monumental novels strive to imagine alternatives to the levelling process of globalization and to rethink transnational relationality. They continuously negotiate the close-by-home and the planetary by composing their narratives in accordance

with an approach of 'scale variance,' an awareness that the realities they represent change according to the distance or proximity they take in relation to the observer. Through a varied performance of close and distanced 'readings' of the world, they display a mutual impingement between the local and the global.

As I will show, the monumental scope of novels like *2666* reflects an increasing awareness of global complicity that pertains to our 'networked society' (in Castells's term). They challenge us to incorporate in our ethics a sense of what is happening outside of our immediate or national environment. Questions of scale, size, and magnitude have become especially urgent in late globalization (Moraru 2011), during which the domains of political, aesthetic, and ethical relationships between human beings are continuously expanding. Although big, ambitious works of literature were arguably always directed at the world scale, exerting "world effects" (Moretti 1996: 51), today's monumental novels, the global scale becomes a requirement. These novels are 'global' almost by default because everyday reality is as well.

This also means that ethical questions and problems, and their representation in literature, increasingly move away from notions of the abstract 'Other' to concrete others with whom we share the globe. Marshall Brown describes this development towards considerations of the concrete, geographical other as 'horizontal ethics.' Such an ethics entails border-crossing and traveling:

Horizontal, global ethics are excursive. They took their rise when Adam and Eve left Paradise to wander the world. Paradise was transcendent, located on the top of an unscalable mountain, but humans fell out of it when they entered history. (2008: 53)

He juxtaposes this ethic to a vertical ethics that he finds more conducive to literary representations. Vertical ethics concern ways of living together with people who inhabit the same geographical place as us (59). Yet, the monumental novels I analyze below, under the influence of globalization, are rather informed by horizontal ethics. Such an ethics, we will see, is both a challenge and an imperative, a requirement and a problem for literary representation.

An important reason that horizontal, global ethics have become a pressing concern, lies in the extent to which human lives and deaths are mediated. Continuously, we are exposed to the mediated lives of people remote from us in space and situation. As Simon Cooke assesses this challenge:

If we can characterize modernization and globalization as creating an increasing network of connections, as expanding the surface area of our interpersonal and intercultural contact zones, then the ethical imperative today is one in which we are required, not only to respond to a given situation as it occurs—to respond to an encounter in our immediate environment (with sympathy)—but *to incorporate in our ethic a sense of what is happening elsewhere*. (2008: 166; my emphasis)

This requirement is of course difficult to fulfill, as demonstrated by my analysis of Bolaño's *2666* in the next chapter. While we are more sharply aware of connectivity than ever before, the relations binding people in different parts of the world to analogy are so big and complex as to be obscured. We are confronted here with a central ethical deadlock of our time: on the one hand, global relations are sublimely unrepresentable, with no safe distance, no 'outside' position of overview from which to analyze them; on the other, we cannot feign innocence when constant exposure to media brings the lives of others so close that it makes it impossible to ignore their needs. Jean Baudrillard phrases this paradox in a negative way in "Global Debt": "[t]he perpetual intimation of the media in terms of violence, suffering, and catastrophe, far from exalting some sort of collective solidarity, only demonstrates our real impotence and drives us to panic and resentment" (1997: 40). Acknowledging others, after all, does not automatically entail an ability to act adequately on this recognition.

As a result of this predicament, novels that amass and attempt to encompass an exceedingly large number of different geographic settings in their narration remain necessarily incomplete. They face the challenge of meaningfully commenting on, and taking a critical distance to, globalization without denying that they are themselves implied in these processes, and are in fact products of them. As I will argue, novels like *2666*, Vollmann's *The Atlas* and Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* do not offer false consolation in the face of asymmetrical global relations, but rather acknowledge these challenges and difficulties both formally and thematically.

In conclusion, the background to the developments I study is constituted by a conjunction of technological factors of digitalization and datafication, and socio-ethical challenges caused by globalization. Together, these elements inspire a current preoccupation with size and preservation in the novel. In *Narrative Negotiations*, Kirstin Veel pointedly assesses the situation I have sketched here and the possible responses of literature to this status quo:

Today we find ourselves in a world globally linked by media that provide us with continuous information from the whole world about the whole world. Literary fiction can respond in two ways: reinforce difference between storytelling and the flow of information, defending fiction's ability to select what is important and exclude what is not, or aim to incorporate the overload of information into the story, thereby challenging the boundaries of what storytelling entails, but in effect creating stories that respond to what seems to be the current cultural conditions of info processing. (2009: 9-10)

Whereas Veel researches novels that are committed to the latter response by incorporating information structures, the monumental novels that I study in this thesis should be understood as doing both. They stress what is different and important about literature and they are inspired by new modes of representation and social relations.

1.5 Devices and Strategies in the Monumental Novel

In *Staging the Archive: Art and Photography in the Age of New Media* (2014), Ernst van Alphen analyzes 'archival artworks,' a trend in the visual arts since the 1960s, of art practices that use principles of archival organization such as lists, inventories, and storages. The monumental effects in the novels of Knausgård, Bolaño, Danielewski, and Vollmann can be seen as an analogous phenomenon occurring in the literary novel. These writers structure their works according to quantitative strategies of the database in conjunction with the more symbolic or synecdochal logic associated with novelistic narratives. There is a meaningful tension at work between the two modes of representation. In what follows we will see how this tension plays out within their works.

I only want to here introduce these organizing principles and devices. In the following chapters I will examine more fully how totalization is the construction principle of the narrative plot that strives towards closure and is thus the most 'monumental' characteristic of narrative. Interminability or digressive narration, I will point out, goes against totalization by performing the (theoretical) limitlessness that characterizes the archive or database, within linear narrative and between the covers of the book. Lists reinforce the sense of infinity. Last, the anaphoric singulative mode of narration, hostile to narrative compression, poses a cognitive challenge to readers in the digital age.

In literature, we are familiar with the urge to preserve 'everything' and to be able to retrieve it in an act of 'total recall,' from earlier works

such as Danilo Kiš's "The Encyclopedia of the Dead (A Whole Life)" (1982), which tells of a book that contains the biography of every ordinary life lived since 1789. To select one more example out of many, Jorge-Luís Borges "The Library of Babel" (1941) describes a library as big as the universe, containing every possible book—including each book that *could* be written. Where these stories imaginatively describe the utopian (or rather dystopian) idea of storing 'all the information in the world,' monumental novels enact and perform it in a quantitative manner. They do this by way of principles of composition like expansion and interminability, the anaphoric singulative frequency, and devices like lists and enumerations. The strategies I explore here are not new—lists derive from the epic, interminability was important during Romanticism, and the anaphoric singulative mode goes back at least to Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. But they obtain a new urgency in today's media-culture. The following overview suggests how literature, by emphasizing its own powers of scope and duration, reacts to the issues outlined at the beginning of this chapter; issues of attention, valuation, and selection.

1.5.1 Totalization

Totalization binds together the beginning, middle, and end of plot, the organizing principle of all narratives. It is thus the most 'narrative' of the strategies and principles I discuss here, and the most monumental as it is aimed at encapsulating and synthesizing the (novelistic) material. Let us begin with the most basic concept, common to even the smallest possible stories. In his *Poetics* (350 BCE), Aristotle argued that the plot or *mythos* should meet three criteria. First, it should be coherent, with all its composite parts forming a unity. It should consist of a beginning, middle, and end-structure, and the action should be "complete in itself." Related to this point is the second demand: that its parts be so tightly interwoven that if one would move or remove the tiniest part, the work as a whole would completely change in its meaning. Last, and most important for the present study, the plot must be of 'a certain length'. The longer it is, the more beautiful, as long as it is containable in the reader's memory:

... a picture, or any other composite object, if it is to be beautiful, must not only have its parts properly arranged, but be of an appropriate size; for beauty depends on size and structure. Accordingly, a minute picture cannot be beautiful (for when our vision has almost lost its sense of time it becomes confused); nor can an immense one (for we cannot take it all in together, and so our vision loses its unity and wholeness)—imagine a picture a thousand miles long! So, just as there is a proper size for bodies

and pictures (a size that can be kept in view), there is also a proper amplitude for tables (what can be kept well in one's mind). (1968: 27)

Aristotle's last demand, that the plot should be containable in memory qua length, is not restricted to oral traditions, as one might think. We can also apply it to the novel: even though we do not need to remember the text verbatim, memory helps us to construct relations between beginning, middle, and end.

According to Peter Brooks, plot is not only the organizing principle (or 'design') of narrative; it consists of all intentional structures, every element that pushes the story forward and steers towards a conclusion. We read with an eye to the end: "[i]f the motor of narrative is desire, totalizing, building ever-larger units of meaning, the ultimate determinants of meaning lie *at the end*, and narrative desire is ultimately, inexorably, desire *for the end*" (52). The events that occur *in medias res*, then, stand to this ending, this plenitude of meaning, as parts to a whole. Narration assimilates information by recounting it in the synecdochal mode (White 1973). In literary representation, the synecdoche operates by an integrative logic: the part symbolizes, and is in fact a microscopic replication of, the totality (*Ibid.* 34-5). Only the end can claim a final plenitude of meaning, and close the sentence or the story as a signifying totality: the end rewrites the beginning and the middle.

Of course, there would be no plot if we skipped the middle part and rushed straight to the end. As Brooks notes, we need at least a minimal detour for narrativity to occur, the "arabesque or squiggle toward the end" (104). But what if this detour forks into multiple detours, and these detours become so long, erratic, and complex that they frustrate the totalizing drive? That is exactly what 'interminability' or digressive narration entails. Yet, as we will see, it also confirms in a way the final 'plenitude' of meaning that all narrative presumes: totality requires digression to become meaningful as such in the first place.

1.5.2 Interminability: digression and regression

Interminability does not suggest an opposition with totality, but its problematization or undoing, while presupposing the frame of totality as an unattainable horizon. Although digression and totalization oppose each other in terms of closure, they are sides of the same coin. Digressions in the contemporary monumental novel are often a nudge to the nineteenth-century novelistic convention of the textual aside. Novels such as *Moby-Dick* and *Anna Karenina* famously include long, often non-narrative interludes, like the former's cetology chapter that lists types of whales, and the latter's passages on agriculture and the social position of peasants. Vollmann rehashes this practice, for instance in *The Royal Family* (2000), which has sections that break up the narrative threads

for pages on end, like a journalistic 'essay on bail' (227-42) and a lyrical piece on San Francisco's Geary street (567-73). On one of these digressive interludes, Vollmann wrote in a letter to his editor, in defense against cuts:

You're right that the reader won't miss this if it's not there, and it is long and it delays the story. However . . . in my state of doubt, I went and reached for *Moby-Dick*. Just consider how much of this book is composed of digressions on cutting up whales. (2004b: 322)

The reason that Vollmann feels the need to defend such passages is that they pose an assault on the reader's attention span (as Beethoven did in the eighteenth, and Wagner in the nineteenth century).

Digression, or the exploration of narrative by-ways, stretches the time of narration. Digressive narrative performs a perpetual flight from time. Friedrich Schlegel called such seemingly endless digressions "*permanente Parekbase*" (1962: 85), a temporary distancing, turning away from the subject. *Permanente Parekbase* is a time-worn strategy for putting off the story's ending. By the same logic, regression problematizes the narrating act as it makes it impossible to demarcate a beginning for the story. Together, digression and regression gesture towards an interminable narration that is a direct consequence of the ambition to be comprehensive. This ambition, when pursued in the linear mode of novelistic writing, causes a delay of action. In a famous passage from Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67), the eponymous hero, brusquely interrupting the narration of his life story, observes:

I am this month one whole year older than I was this time twelve-month; and having got, as you perceive, almost into the middle of my fourth volume – and no farther than to my first day's life – 'tis demonstrative that I have three hundred and sixty-four days more life to write just now, than when I first set out; so that instead of advancing, . . . I am just thrown so many volumes back. . . . I should just live 364 times faster than I should write. It must follow, an' please your worship, that the more I write, the more I shall have to write. (2009, 4: 13, 195-96)

Shandy wants to tell his life story *ab ovo*, from the egg, so he starts with recounting the specifics of his conception. But then he finds that he needs to go back in time to include information on his parents' lives, which prompts him to go back even further. His intended autobiography never reaches its conclusion, and the narrative ends four years before he was born. Following from Shandy's ambition to be comprehensive in a

linear narrative, prose writing becomes an infinitely regressive and slow medium that is impotent at keeping up with life.

Ross Chambers theorizes this style of narration in his book *Loiterature* (1999). He writes that digression is hostile to linearity, as it leaves all options open (31). In this respect it bears an inherent potential for resistance to the acceleration of culture—like Baudelaire's *flâneur*, who Chambers characterizes as a figure of belatedness, rebelling against the speed-up of time caused by industrialization (215). As I argue in chapter three with respect to Knausgård's *My Struggle*, this potential for resistance becomes relevant again today in the face of the 'presentism' that is prevalent in digital culture and in the perpetual 'now' of new media (Chun 2011).

Digression and regression obviously have their bearing on the construction of plot as a basic organizing principles. Through this strategy of interminable narration, monumental novels purposefully frustrate the totalizing drive. Often, this effectuates a sense of frustration and information overload that, in the next chapter, I analyze in terms of the aesthetics of the sublime. Because of the double temporality of the monumental, digression in these novels performs something similar to the typical Romantic sensation of *Sehnsucht*, which revolves around extending and postponing linearity. At the same time, digression participates in a mode of recording that pertains to the archive because both the archival and the digressive produce their objects as they record them. As Derrida wrote:

the archive ... is not only the place for stocking and for conserving archivable content of *the past* ... the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event. (1995: 16-7)

In this respect there is a notable overlap between the organizing structures of archive and digressive narrative. Through such interminable structures, monumental novels gesture towards limitlessness as they transgress the limits at both ends of temporal linearity. *Pace* Manovich, narrative constructions are never as cohesive that they cannot be added to.

Digressive narration ultimately postpones and, in the final analysis, distracts us from, death. Carried to its logical conclusions, the race against time entails a flight from death. This implies a wish for immortality or eternity, what musicologist Arnold Schering has called *Verewigenwollen* (1935: 9). Digressions therefore play an important role in the construction of the monumental novel as both a gesture toward the eternal (or at least

the lasting) and a direct cause for the exceptional volume of the work. As Carlo Levi writes in his introduction to Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*,

If a straight line is the shortest distance between two fated and inevitable points, digressions will lengthen it; and if these digressions become so complex, so tangled and tortuous, so rapid as to hide their own tracks, who knows—perhaps death may not find us, perhaps time will lose its way, and perhaps we ourselves can remain concealed in our shifting hiding places. (qtd. in Calvino 1988: 46)

The most famous instance of this use of digressive narrative to ward off death is the *Thousand and One Nights*, in which Scheherazade saves her own life, night after night, by telling stories within stories.⁵¹ This example from one of the oldest known traditions of storytelling drives home the fundamental importance of digression for narrative: rather than an aberration, digression is a foundational element of all acts of storytelling. Bolaño, as noted, allegedly had a similar goal in postponing an operation to finish his novel in a race against death. The ending of the story is conflated with death. Plot, Brooks writes, is the internal logic of the discourse of mortality: “all narrative may be in essence obituary” (1984: 95). On a related note, Benjamin has stated in “The Storyteller” (1936) that we seek in narrative fictions a knowledge of death, which is denied to us in our own lives. Only in retrospect, with death, does life become meaningful: “[d]eath is the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell” (1999b: 94). Only the end can finally determine meaning, but digressive narration goes against this principle. It sacrifices coherence on the altar of immortality: the immortality of the text, of the author—and, by extension, of the novel itself.⁵²

Besides postponing the ending of the text and the death of the author, digressions can also be employed to ward off the death of the novel. In

51 Likewise Laurence Sterne, who was dying from influenza while writing *Tristram Shandy*, suggestively weaved this process of his own dying into the narration, for instance when Tristram mentions: “I lost some fourscore ounces of blood this week in a most uncritical fever which attacked me at the beginning of this chapter” (2009, 4: 13, 195-96). Another example of digressive storytelling as warding off death is found in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Cien años de soledad* (1967), where Aureliano Babilonia Buendía dies the moment he has decoded and read his family history.

52 Of course, open-endedness does not by itself set apart today's monumental novels. The narrative structures of modernist masterpieces like Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake* are equally open-ended. The difference with these modernist works is that in the monumental novels under study, open-endedness is constituted by quantitative representational strategies which result in their extraordinary volume.

'never-ending' novels, e.g. the 'big American novel' after World War II such as Saul Bellow's *Augie March* (1953) that Mark Greif writes about,

It seemed it might be proof that the novel could not be killed, could not die, if a mode could be found in which a narrator could never be stopped from talking. Talking in this instance meant telling stories, each ramifying from the last. (1990: 24)

More recently, literary critic James Wood has likewise identified a common trait in what he calls 'big, ambitious novels,' that "want to abolish stillness, as if ashamed of silence ... Storytelling has become a kind of grammar in these novels; it is how they structure and drive themselves on" (2005: 168).⁵³ Like Scheherazade, the monumental novel wards off its own death through interminable storytelling, as if the novel could not be killed if narration does not stop, if new stories keep sprouting up from old ones. Through digressions, the novel remains open-ended, in perpetual flight or motion that postpones the genre's own end.

1.5.3 Listing

No story is anything more than a list.

—William T. Vollmann, *Rising Up and Rising Down*⁵⁴

Another device that furthers this effect of interminability in the novel is the list (or, as a variant, the enumeration). Lists are a first and most basic ordering principle of database and archive (Van Alphen 2014: 91). The

⁵³ Wood is dismissive of this specific trait of the 'big, ambitious novel' which he calls *hysterical realism*. From his review of Zadie Smith's debut *White Teeth* (2000), a novel that Wood ranges under this category: "The big contemporary novel is a perpetual-motion machine that appears to have been embarrassed into velocity. It seems to want to abolish stillness, as if ashamed of silence — as it were, a criminal running endless charity marathons. Stories and sub-stories sprout on every page, as these novels continually flourish their glamorous congestion." (2001: par.2) His critique echoes the dismissal, in the nineteenth century, of the un-form of the 'loose baggy monster.' Henry James used this term in his Preface to the New York Edition of *The Tragic Muse* (1908), to denote novels that he found lacking in proportion and design, such as *War and Peace* and *The Three Musketeers*. Echoing Aristotle, he wrote: "A picture without composition slights its most precious chance for beauty. . . . There may in its absence be life, incontestably, as "The Newcomers" has life, as "Le Trois Mousquetaires," as Tolstoi's "Peace and War," have it; but what do such large loose baggy monsters, with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary, artistically mean?" (1: x) Such criticisms of the serial novel were widespread in the nineteenth century. For a good overview of these critiques, see Gowan Dawson's article "Literary Megatheriums and Loose Baggy Monsters: Paleontology and the Victorian Novel." (2011).

⁵⁴ (2003: 187)

list relies on the principle of expandability. When incorporated in works of art and literature, as Umberto Eco has noted, this device often evokes a sense of infinity. Lists are often employed when

we do not know the boundaries of what we wish to portray, where we do not know how many things we are talking about and presume their number to be, if not infinite, then at least astronomically large. We cannot provide a definition by essence and so, to be able to talk about it, to make it comprehensible or in some way perceivable, we list its properties—and, as we shall see, the accidental properties of something, from the Greeks to modern times, are thought to be infinite. (Eco 2009: 15)

The practice of listing can therefore be seen as a way of incorporating the open-endedness of the database into the book-bound novel.

Georges Perec, who repeatedly practiced this form of archival organization in his works, complained in his text “Notes Concerning the Objects that are in my Work-table” (1985) about the fact that the list was disappearing from contemporary literature. Perec mourned the loss of the art of enumeration as it was powerfully performed in “the catalogues of Rabelais, the Linnaean list of fish in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, the list of Geographers who’ve explored Australia in *Captain Grant’s Children*” (1999: 146). We could add to this list the catalogues of ships in the *Iliad*, *Ulysses’ “Ithaca”* chapter, and Raymond Queneau’s “Cent milles milliards de poèmes”.

If it is true that the list was a lost art in the literature of the 1980s, we can discern today a revival of the practice of listing in the monumental novel. We could evoke Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* and *Only Revolutions*, that incorporate user-generated lists of important events in the twentieth century. Knausgård in *My Struggle* lists the mundane: objects in his mother’s house that have been there since his childhood (2013: 312); and all the people living in his street when he was a kid, including names and occupations, as well as their children’s names (2014: 15-6).

However, there is an important difference between the above-listed works that practice listing, and the list in the contemporary monumental novels. In the case of the earlier works that incorporate enumerations and catalogues (with the notable exception of Perec and Queneau), these devices are still embedded within the encompassing framework of the narrative. In the monumental novel, as I propose in the next chapter, the balance often tips over and the list becomes the encompassing structure in which smaller narratives are incorporated. This reversal is typical of the current archival shift in media, as Van Alphen has noted (2014: 12). Thus, lists are one of the ways in which these novels account

for narrative's increasing organization as a database. In monumental novels, narratives become absorbed in database structures, which form their environment.

1.5.4 The anaphoric singulative

Besides interminable structures and lists, the extraordinary volume of the monumental novel is, to an important extent, an effect of quantification, or an unwillingness to compress. To further their goal of inclusiveness, these novels often employ the 'anaphoric singulative' mode, a subtype of the category of frequency in narratology as theorized by Gerard Genette in his *Narrative Discourse* (1980). Frequency is the relation between the number of times an event occurs in the story and the number of times it is mentioned in the text of the narrative.⁵⁵ The anaphoric singulative is an uncommon subtype of the singulative, in which what happened n times (n being >1) is narrated n times (nN / nS). In other words, each mention in the text corresponds to one occurrence in the story. We find a parody of this practice in Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605), when Sancho Panza tells the story of a fisherman who wanted to transport three hundred goats in a boat that can hold only one. As Sancho narrates, it becomes clear that he intends to tell the event three hundred times, once for each trip the fisherman took. Quixote impatiently comments, "Take it that they are all across . . . and do not go on coming and going like that, or you will never get them all over in a year" (1993: 154). The anaphoric singulative subtype of frequency is not commonly used since it obviously amounts to an inefficient way of storytelling. Narrating 'singulatively' is the most 'archival' of the monumental strategies and devices discussed in the present section, since it is a form of storytelling *without compression*.

As I show in chapter three, the anaphoric singulative goes a long way in accounting for the extraordinary volume of the autobiographical novels in Knausgård's *My Struggle*-series. To give only one example, the author seems to have felt the need to include all the girls he has ever fallen in love with, all his former girlfriends, and all his hopeless crushes. Usually, in telling our life stories, we make a selection of the most important people and events. When writing a novel about personal experiences, it seems logical to choose one or two of the most important objects of our affection, then to compress some of the characteristics of others, and amalgamate them into one character. Knausgård, however, seems bound to take every minor episode of his life exceptionally seriously, too seriously to employ compression.

To give one more example, Vollmann notoriously refuses to let his

⁵⁵ Genette distinguishes singulative narratives (that narrate once what has happened once), repeating narratives (that narrate n times what has happened once), and iterative narratives (that narrate once what has happened n times) (1980: 114).

novels be edited. In an interview he said: “They want me to cut, and I argue, so they cut my royalties, and I agree never to write a long book again” (McGrath 2009). A case in point is *The Royal Family*, an eight-hundred-page epic journey into the heart of the Tenderloin area in San Francisco, in which private detective Henry Tyler goes on a quest for a mythical figure called the ‘Queen of the Whores.’ In this novel, the anaphoric singulative is employed to provide background stories for all the prostitutes he encounters, in 36 books and 593 chapters. Vollmann will not compress characteristics of these women into one archetype of the ‘tart with a heart,’ pars pro toto: he wants to preserve them all. In collecting and chronicling these stories, a refusal to edit is as much an ethical stance as it is an aesthetic decision: Vollmann thus creates an inclusive narrative monument to those in the margins of US society.

Whereas narrative is marked by what Manovich calls a ‘syntagmatic’ order, since each subsequent element is the outcome of an act of selection from an implicit and invisible paradigm, we see that the anaphoric singulative frequency emulates the ‘paradigmatic’ ordering system of the database rather than narrative compression. Therefore, this strategy of representation incorporates the inclusiveness of the archival into the book-bound novel.

Conclusion

We begin to see how the ‘hybrid’ strategies between database and narrative as employed in the works of contemporary writers like Bolaño, Knausgård, Danielewski, and Vollmann amount to a literary monumentality in both senses of commemoration and bigness. An inclusive urge to preserve what is judged as important and valuable, and an unwillingness to select, result in novels of extraordinary volume. The fact that these authors incorporate the principles of archive and database within the book-bound novel, moreover, makes them monumental in the sense of being enclosed. Thus these works are able to obtain a symbolic quality that the online database, because of its apparent limitlessness, cannot achieve. A tension is put to work between narrative selection and valuation and the all-inclusiveness that characterizes the database; between totalization and interminability; or, between syntagm and paradigm. This tension makes these works partake in the monumental in both senses of the word: commemorative *and* big, all-encompassing *and* selective. Monumentalizing is an act of *binding*: between the covers of the book-bound novel, the narrative and database meet and form a monumental monument.

A dual literary response takes form to the current technological developments in Western society that I discussed above. On the one hand, digitalization and big data exert a profound influence on ‘analog’

literature, even if this influence goes unacknowledged (and when authors are like Knausgård and Vollmann are manifestly opposed to new media). On the other hand, novels stress their difference with respect to the engulfing flow of data. They defy the predictions of shortening attention spans, emphasize their monumental qualities like weight and bulk and, through digression and regression, promote a new kind of 'slow' reading. By putting the author figure back at the center of the work, and making his biography inseparable from his oeuvre, moreover, monumentality in literature opposes a participatory culture that democratizes authorship. These are some of the ways in which authors today are geared toward media divergence by emphasizing what is special about literature within dialectic relations to the larger media-scape. Thus, they engage in a project of revaluation of the book-bound novel that takes place in interaction between different media, between the 'old' and the 'new'. The monumental novel reflects on what literature should preserve, and which literature should be preserved. It does so by making archaic practices of representation (such as chronicles, lists, and enumerations), newly relevant in a dialogue with new media. Finally, it is the novel itself that is re-valued and preserved. Sanctioned by the circular logic of the monument, these authors write works of art on works of art, as goes the formula of Jean Paul. They commemorate and preserve the novel as an art form while aspiring to their own brand of virtuosity that will carry them into the future.

We have seen how this repeats the mechanisms of monumentality as they originally emerged in the nineteenth century, in that: first, the monumental comprises a set of strategies to consolidate the novel as an art form of importance in the face of changes in culture and media; second, it is informed by the dual temporality of a linear-historical and a (circular) aesthetic monumentality; and third, author and work are conjoined in the monument. Monumentality today confronts the challenges of an era in which the spheres of political, ethical, and aesthetic relations are expanding. In the next chapter, I investigate how such an expansion in the monumental novel effectuates the comeback of an aesthetics rooted in an eighteenth century tradition of the sublime, in the context of information overload.

Chapter two

A Sublime of Data Overload in Roberto Bolaño's 2666

For small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, true ones, ever leave to copestone to posterity. God keep me from ever completing anything. This whole book is but a draught; nay, but the draught of a draught.

—Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*⁵⁶

Maybe it is still true to say that "the desert is growing." However, the curtain has fallen on the luxuriances and fertilities by comparison with which our "desert" could be measured.

—Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*⁵⁷

Because of an increase and changes in the ways we handle information, the cultural significance of the database has markedly grown during the last decades. As discussed in the previous chapter, Manovich (2001) has pronounced the database's replacement of narrative as our primary means to "structure our experience of ourselves and of the world" (219). Yet, even as database and narrative are often pitted against each other (Manovich 2001: 225; Folsom 2007: 1577), they also come together to produce hybrid forms. As other scholars have argued, both devices should rather be analyzed in their relations of inspiration and cross-fertilization (Hayles 2007; Vesna 2007; Veel 2011; Pressman 2014).

56 (1920: 138)

57 (1997: 26)

The increasing cultural importance of the database in the current media-culture, together with the digitization of more and more information, influences existing modes of representation in analog as well as digital art forms. In Victoria Vesna's word, "[i]n an age in which we are increasingly aware of ourselves as databases, identified by social security numbers and genetic structures, it is imperative that artists actively participate in how data is shaped, organised, and disseminated" (2000: 155). This realization has led her and other scholars like Kirstin Veel to consider the new hybrid forms of film, literature, and art they see emerging under the umbrella term of 'database aesthetics'. In Veel's characterization,

[w]hat is termed database aesthetics ... inscribes itself in a long cultural tradition of fragmentation, excess and the challenge to linearity, but its prevalence in contemporary culture - from popular films such as *Memento* (2000) to experimental online artworks such as David Clark's *A is for Apple* (2002) - justify its identification as a distinct phenomenon. (2011: 310)

The works of art that Veel mentions share a mode of inventory that "prioritizes simultaneity over selection and probes the boundaries of contemporary conditions of attention" (312). In the words of Christiane Paul, "Database aesthetics itself has become an important cultural narrative of our time, constituting a shift towards a relational, networked approach to gathering and creating knowledge about cultural specifics" (2007: 155). There is a growing body of research on these forms influenced by the database: Vesna (2007) focuses on new media art, Van Alphen (2014) on the archival in the visual arts, and Veel (2009) on information structures in the novel.

An underdeveloped aspect of this research into the hybridization between analog art and database, is its prefiguration in theories of the sublime. In this chapter I will trace a genealogy that proves how today's database aesthetics is rooted in an eighteenth-century aesthetic of the mathematical and Romantic sublime. Even though Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant developed their philosophies in a specifically eighteenth-century context, I argue that the sublime has a renewed relevance for contemporary informational societies trying to process cascades of data. In today's (Western) culture and media, data are everywhere, rapidly piling up in dazzling numbers.

Not too long ago storage and transmission media helped people grapple with kilobytes and megabytes, but today's databases and data backbones daily handle not just terabytes but petabytes of information, where *peta-*

is a prefix which denotes the unfathomable quantity of a quadrillion, or a thousand trillion. (Gitelman and Jackson 2013: 1)

The “unfathomable quantity” means that we are confronted with objects and abstractions that surpass our imagination (as well as human reason and attention spans) on a daily basis. There have been numerous attempts, for instance, to estimate the scope and speed of computer connectivity, but such conjectures fail to help us comprehend the magnitude of networks, the speed of transfers occurring across them, and the processing capacities required to facilitate big data interactions. Increasingly, comprehension is replaced by a ‘mere’ counting.

Though the number of data on the Internet is not infinite, it is comparable to what Burke, in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1759), has called ‘artificial infinity’. Artificial infinity describes the situation when we cannot perceive the bounds of a phenomenon (1990: II: IX, 68). Big data is such a phenomenon that surpasses representation. It triggers experiences that are close to Kant’s mathematical sublime, which he defines in the *Critique of Judgement* (1790) as the “estimation of magnitude by means of concepts of number” (*Ibid.*251). At the same time, the sheer volume and diversity of information that is currently available renders any global synthesis (what Kant calls ‘comprehension’) unfeasible. Hence, we need efficient algorithms like the Google Search Engine to combat the sublime by filtering abundance for us. Faced with the monumental task of fathoming infinite data, the human mind is an outdated mechanism.

This chapter questions how the sublime encodes itself as an aesthetics of data overload in the monumental novel. I answer this question in my conclusion, on the basis of four sections that address the following sub-questions: How can we categorize the current sublime of data overload (2.1 and 2.2)? How does it relate to (reinforce or contradict) monumentality in the novel (2.2)? How does this sublime reflect on the relation between narrative and database (2.3)? What does a shift from causality to seriality, from narrating to counting, and from selection to inclusivity mean for the novel’s potential to memorialize and commemorate persons and events that official history overlooks (2.4)?

I address these problems through an analysis of Roberto Bolaño’s *2666*. The final work in the oeuvre of the Chilean author, posthumously published in 2004 (the English translation followed in 2008), has been widely typified by critics as a monumental achievement.⁵⁸ Indeed, judging by the extensive narrative range of *2666*, Bolaño seems to have aimed to “fit the whole world inside a single text,” in Alessandro

58 Boullosa 2007; Paz Soldán 2008; Echevarría 2004: 896; Novillo-Corvalán 2013: 349; Mir 2005: 205; Maslin 2008; Deckard 2012: 362.

Portelli's words (1994: 100). Consequently, *2666* is a hybrid novel that catalogues types of seaweed, methods of fortunetelling, recipes, treatises on the importance of vegetable fibers, and "more corpses than a *CSI* box set" (Chatfield 2009). It includes biographies, case studies, and police files, and extensively refers to literature, painting and cinema. The text is 'encyclopedic' in terms of literary genres and styles: its repertoire of narrative modes extends from academic satire to detective story, from journalistic reportage to *Bildungsroman*, from allegory to surrealism. Yet another monumental aspect of this text is its *geographic* range: Bolaño's "aesthetic of expansion" (Novillo-Corvalán 2013) takes the reader all over the world.⁵⁹ And, last, the novel amasses different time periods as well: its narration covers almost an entire century of history. Inspired by Ciudad Juárez, the fictional Mexican border town of Santa Teresa in the Sonora desert is the niche where all these dispersed places and times come together. Or more precisely and accurately, Santa Teresa is a 'vanishing point,' since, as my analysis will make clear, this mysterious city sucks all storylines into its void.

Yet despite, or rather because of, its comprehensive scope, this novel's monumentality consists in its inability to achieve totality. *2666* is profoundly incomplete, as the many storylines of its five books do not coalesce. So far, critics have not remarked upon this failed unity. Brett Levinson, for instance, holds that "Bolaño's narrative evolves as the accretion of disparate tales, each bound to the next by a common and continuous form. The reader therefore encounters no fragments in *2666*" (2009: 177). To correct this critical oversight, I read *2666*'s monumentality as a *necessarily* unfinished form, a hybrid between the organizing structures of database and narrative. In accord with the Janus-faced logic of monumentality, *2666* transforms, rethinks, and innovates the novel, while pointing back to literature's Romantic roots. In its performance of data overload, *2666* is not exclusively related to the new media environment, but is rooted in an aesthetic of the sublime that revolves around excess, absence, and expendability.

In the first section, I ask what theory of the sublime pertains to today's situation of data overload as it informs the structures of monumental novels. How can we theorize this sublime through existing models, and in what respect do these earlier models fall short of categorizing it? As a way into the subject, I review the idea of infinity in Edmund Burke and John Locke and the Kantian mathematical sublime. This will allow me to place the current influence of database structures on narratives in the novel in a larger frame of the history of artistic representation. In turn,

⁵⁹ Its narrative space encompasses a whole range of countries including Argentina, England, France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, The Netherlands, Poland, Prussia, Romania, Russia, Spain, Switzerland, and the United States. See Valdes 2009:17. See also the Google Maps page of the novel's locations.

considering how counting and linearity were strategically employed at earlier stages in the history of literary representation will allow us to grasp the meaning of their reemergence in the database.

A second section will investigate how the sublime relates to monumentality, both understood as an increase in novelistic scope, and the canonization of 'major' authors. To what extent is the monumental still informed by sublimity and Romanticism? I discuss how Romantic notions of the fragment and *Sehnsucht* resonate in *2666's* form and themes. Then I address Jean-François Lyotard's postmodern sublime as a critique of monumentality's determination of the indeterminate and the neoromantic canonization of the monumental author-figure. To move beyond the neoromantic façade that Lyotard critiques, I propose a sublime of data overload as a frame to understand the reading experience that pertains to the monumental novel.

In my third section I research how the form of the database, as incorporated in the novel, poses a response to the sublime of data overload. I analyze *2666's* "Book IV: The Part About the Crimes" as a hybrid form amalgamating the organizing principles of the database and of narrative. This part of Bolaño's novel thematically centers on the killings of hundreds of women in Santa Teresa, and is based on the real-life femicides in Ciudad Juárez in the 1990s. It consists of a list, presented as forensic files of discovered corpses. I read this book as an encompassing database structure in which narrative fragments are embedded. What representational strategies are at the novel's disposal when 'telling' is increasingly understood as 'counting' (Ernst 2013) and when the overarching frame is no longer the hierarchical beginning, middle, end structure of the story (Manovich 2011; Van Alphen 2014)?

The fourth and final section of this chapter will assess the consequences of the sublime as data overload for the idea of the novel as a monument or memorial structure. Can the monumental novel function as a memorial for those that are overlooked in society, when its organizing principles are archival rather than narrative? Can the archive or database of victims transcend the absence, gaps, and incompleteness that mark the sublime, in order to render the victims of the Santa Teresa femicides present? I argue that, with new conjunctions between narrative and database, the possibility of an inclusive monumentality arises. This inclusive monumentality in the novel, however, does have serious consequences when it comes to networks of global collectivity. As my analysis will reveal, all of *2666's* characters from remote parts of the world are indirectly complicit in the horrors that take place in Santa Teresa. The monumental novel is not only a memorial for everyone, it is also a monument by everyone.

In framing the sublime of data overload in *2666*, I provide a much needed historical dimension for what only seems a contemporary phenomenon. Even though long, digressive novels are not specific to

the information age, they do reveal something about the present. For one thing, they show us how big a part the unimaginable plays in our lives. As Hayles phrases it, “humans are now able to go beyond their evolutionary inheritance into realms that cannot easily be imagined or represented by the human mind alone” (2005: 180). *2666* enacts this often dizzying experience of the data sublime through its form. At the same time, this novel critically scrutinizes the neoromantic appropriation of the monumental author-figure by the literary industry. This chapter will offer new insights not only in the novel as part of the contemporary media ecology, but also into the dynamics of human perception and representation more generally. My exploration of the characteristics of the current sublime of data overload as it emerges in monumental novels today will deepen our understanding of the impact of technology upon our culture and the conditions for literary fiction in an age of big data.

2.1 From Interminable Narration to Infinity

The place of wandering knows no straight line; one never goes from one point to another in it; one does not leave here to go there; there is no point of departure and no beginning to the walk.

– Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*⁶⁰

As discussed in the first chapter, the monumental novel has two dimensions that apparently oppose, yet mutually imply each other: totalization and interminability. In this section I will show how these two conjoin in *2666* to generate an excessive narrativity that precludes closure. The reader is faced with many small, fragmented narratives that never converge, and thereby form an unfinished structure gesturing towards a larger whole that remains out of the conceptual reach of readers and characters alike. I analyze this structure in terms of an aesthetics of the sublime that is marked by an excess of narrative fragments that overwhelm, yet do not grant a subsequent sense of resolution or relief. Instead, this structure offers an immersive experience that involves the breakdown of our hermeneutic capacities to discover meaningful connections within masses of useless information.

First, it is necessary to introduce the structure of *2666*. The novel consists of five ‘books.’ Originally, Bolaño expressed the wish that these be published in five separate volumes, one per year, to provide for his children’s future. His friend and designated literary executor, Ignacio Echevarría, chose otherwise, and prioritized the artistic integrity of the

60 (2003: 94)

whole.⁶¹ To what extent we can speak of ‘integrity’ in the case of 2666, however, remains to be seen. Its five parts, as my analysis will show, never truly overcome their status as fragments to ‘come together’ as a whole. The only continuous thematic threads that run throughout the five books are the Santa Teresa femicides on the one hand, and the mysterious German writer Benno von Archimboldi on the other.⁶² How can we relate this unfinished structure to an aesthetics of the sublime?

As briefly noted in the first chapter, the monumental, marked by a preference for oversized forms, relates to the sublime by way of the ‘colossal’ and the ‘monstrous,’ which exceeds the imagination and representation (Rehding 2009: 32). Indeed, 2666 stands out first and foremost for its impressive bulk. During the process of writing the novel, Bolaño bragged that it would end up being the “fattest novel in the world,” quantitatively overruling the likes of *Moby-Dick* (1851), *Ulysses* (1922), *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), and *Rayuela* (1963) (Valdes 2009: 12; 16). The resulting magnum opus counts 1119 pages, 893 in the English translation. We know that Bolaño insisted on the superiority of big novels on multiple occasions, e.g.:

The novel is an imperfect art. It may be the most imperfect of all literary arts. And the more pages you write, the more possibility there is of revealing imperfections . . . It isn’t the same to build a house as it is to build a skyscraper. Often a house is cozier, but to build a skyscraper you have to be very good. (qtd. in Wimmer 2011)

Pronouncements like these, that plead for the novel as a technically

61 See “A Note from the Author’s Heirs,” included in the English translation of 2666 published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 2008.

62 Although the countless major and minor storylines make it almost impossible to present a synopsis of 2666, for the sake of overview I list the central – admittedly a problematic term in this context – themes of these five parts. “Book I: The Part About the Critics” tells of four literary scholars from different European countries who become obsessed by the writer Archimboldi. They chase him to Santa Teresa, the Mexican border city in Sonora where hundreds of women are murdered under mysterious circumstances. “Book II: The Part About Amalfitano” follows the mentally derailing Oscar Amalfitano, a Chilean professor of Philosophy who has moved to Santa Teresa with his daughter Rosa after his wife left them. “Book III: The Part About Fate” is a neo-noir mystery that revolves around the African-American journalist Quincy Williams who travels to Santa Teresa to cover a boxing match, but gets fascinated by the murders of women and soon becomes entangled in the underworld. “Book IV: The Part About The Crimes” is the only part that focuses directly on the killings. The last part, “Book V: The Part About Archimboldi,” is a *Bildungsroman* that tells the story of the mysterious writer across different European countries during and after World War II, and ends with Archimboldi’s flight to Santa Teresa.

imperfect yet monumental art form, side with the oldest tradition of the sublime. Pseudo-Longinus, who wrote his treatise in classical rhetoric, *Peri tou hupsou* (*On the sublime*), as early as the first century, argues that immortal fame was to be gained through the ‘shock and awe’ imposed by the grand style of sublime oratorical images, that exert an “imperious and irresistible force” (Lang 1890: xiii). The reader or listener is enthralled, carried away, and taken beyond herself to such a degree that her judgment is confounded. Thus Longinus already pointed to the violent character of a sublime which puts limits at stake.

Bolaño seems to adhere to this sublime of shock and awe, for example when he lets a character in *2666* champion the unyielding violence of the monumental novel in favor of the perfectly rounded forms of smaller works:

He chose *The Metamorphosis* over *The Trial*, he chose *Bartleby* over *Moby-Dick*, he chose *A Simple Heart* over *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, and *A Christmas Carol* over *A Tale of Two Cities* or *The Pickwick Papers*. What a sad paradox, thought Amalfitano. Now even bookish pharmacists are afraid to take on the great, imperfect, torrential works, books that blaze paths into the unknown. (227)⁶³

The character Amalfitano mourns the lack of ambition in readers who want to watch the great masters spar but shy away from real struggles that incite the terror of “blood and mortal wounds and stench.” (*Ibid.*) These battles, he feels, only materialize in big, epic novels. Thus Bolaño places the monumental novel in a Longinian tradition, not only by invoking violent images, but also by insisting that these works (‘skyscrapers’ as opposed to cozy houses) are allowed their *imperfections*. It was Longinus’ belief that shortcomings in technique were a small price to be paid for ‘true grandeur’ (Lyotard 1991: 96).

A closer look at the composition of a monumental novel like *2666*, however, reveals how the parallel with the Longinian sublime ends. Longinus explicitly excluded *accumulation* from his grand style: “Sublimity lies in elevation, amplification (*auxesis*) rather in amount; and so you often find sublimity in a single idea, whereas amplification always goes with quantity and a certain degree of redundancy (*periousias*)” (Longinus 1890: XII: 25-8). Thus, hallmarks of today’s monumental novels—redundancy, enumeration, and quantification—are excluded

63 In Bolaño’s introduction to a Spanish edition of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, he celebrates *Moby-Dick* as the quintessential Total American Novel: “[*Moby-Dick*] is the key to those territories that by convention or for convenience’s sake we’ll call the territories of evil, where man does battle with himself and with the unknown and generally is defeated in the end” (qtd. in Wimmer 2013).

from Longinus' conceptions of the sublime. If the monumental revolves around volume and magnitude, it is necessary then to consider the specific workings of totalization and interminability in *2666*, in order to entertain how a poetics of enumeration might amount to an aesthetics of the sublime.

2.1.1 The totalizing drive in *2666*

As I established earlier, narrative digression delays the action of the plot in a flight from time which, carried to its logical conclusions, entails a flight from death. For Bolaño, such a flight from death is exactly what was at stake in writing *2666*. Motivated by the need to support a family and knowing that his failing health would not grant him much time, through his last dozen years, Bolaño maintained the exceptional productivity of a modern-day Scheherazade. Writing at times for 48 hours non-stop, he produced seven novels, three collections of stories, and many essays and poems (Valdes 2009: 12). The creation of *2666*, that Bolaño himself called his "bestial work, . . . a monster that devoured me" (Braithwaite 2006: 113)⁶⁴ became "a one-man race against death" (Herralde 2005: 61). As noted, rumor has it that he even postponed a liver transplant in a vain attempt to finish his work (Wimmer 2011: 13). It is therefore only fitting that the style of his last work is marked by a high degree of digression. As an expression of a longing for eternity (Schering's *Verewigenwollen*), the digressive style is central to the narrative monument as both a gesture toward the eternal (or at least the lasting) and a direct cause for the monumental volume of the work. When we understand totalization as the mental work a reader performs in demarcating and binding the narrative material, we see that monumental novels purposefully frustrate the totalizing drive through strategies of interminable narration. Before we analyze this procedure in terms of the sublime idea of the infinite, let us first see how totalization plays out in *2666*.

Although the individual parts or 'books' of *2666* depart from the traditional, Aristotelian plot structure, surprisingly they start out straightforward in terms of characters' motivations. From the opening of these separate parts, we find certain ambitions taking shape, the fulfillment of which would provide closure to the narrative. According to Brooks, "ambition is inherently totalizing, figuring the self's tendency to appropriation and aggrandizement, moving forward through the encompassment of more, striving to have, to do, and to be more" (1984: 39). Totalizing ambitions inform the narrative arcs of the characters who—literally—take *part* in *2666*, and are therefore a logical starting point for my analysis.

In "Book I: The Part about the Critics," we follow the fictional careers and friendship of a group of European literary scholars—Jean-

64 "obra bestial ... un monstruo que me devoraba." Braithwaite 2006: 113.

Claude Pelletier from France, Manuel Espinoza from Spain, Piero Morini from Italy, and Liz Norton from England – who call themselves ‘Archimboldians.’ These characters are brought together by their shared veneration of the obscure Archimboldi, whom they regard as the greatest post-War German writer, bound to someday receive the Nobel Prize. From their first encounter with his writings, their life’s ambition has been to fully understand every aspect of the author’s oeuvre. Within the novel, this urge to resolve all ambiguity is not restricted to the author’s works: the critics also seek full disclosure of his identity. Beside the rumor that he is extraordinary tall, there is barely any information available. Archimboldi is a vanished author, and the mystery surrounding his work is an important part of his cult status:⁶⁵

... his books appeared with no author photograph on the flaps or back cover; his biographical data was minimal (German writer born in Prussia in 1920); his place of residence was a mystery ... none of his surviving fellow writers had ever seen him; no biography of him existed in German even though sales of his books were rising in Germany as well as the rest of Europe and even in the United States, which like vanished writers (vanished writers or millionaire writers) or the legend of vanished writers. (2666: 15)

The critics cherish every trace of the author as a relic. They argue vehemently with an opposing camp of Archimboldi-scholars who interpret his work slightly differently, and attend conferences with grand titles like “Reflecting the Twentieth Century: The work of Benno von Archimboldi” (71). In their investigations they take their ‘clues’ from the author’s works and from articles about him. They use narrative to fill in the gaps, devising mini-stories as hypotheses. They even try to trace the author down physically: when word comes out that he has been spotted in Mexico, they fly to Santa Teresa. The search for the vanished author, marked by a desire for a plenitude of knowledge on his life and works that would make all fragments of information fit together, thus catalyzes the plot.

The plot of “Book III”: The Part About Fate” is catalyzed by similarly totalizing ambitions. The protagonist Quincy Williams, an African-American journalist from Detroit nicknamed Oscar Fate, travels to Santa

65 The vanished writer is a recurring trope in Bolaño’s writings, that we also find in *The Savage Detectives* (1998, *Los Detectives Salvajes*) and *Distant Star* (1996, *Estrella Distante*). In 2666’s “The Part About Archimboldi” vanished writers abound: for instance when Archimboldi finds a hidden manuscript by the Jewish writer Boris Ansky, and when he visits a ‘house for the vanished writers of Europe,’ which turns out to be a mental asylum (857-59).

Teresa to cover a boxing match for his magazine *Black Dawn*. He soon becomes fascinated with the grand-scale murders of female employees of the many *maquiladoras*, the enormous international assembly plants. In his naïve enthusiasm, he aspires to represent these killings in a feat of in-depth journalism, and to compile the dispersed scraps of evidence into a grand total that will resolve the injustice. The result, as Fate eagerly tries to persuade his editor in chief, must be no less than a “sketch of the industrial landscape in the third world . . . A piece of reportage about the current situation in Mexico, a panorama of the border, a serious crime story, for fuck’s sake” (373). Fate’s editor, who thinks on a smaller scale, asks how many black people are involved in the case, and when Fate is unable to answer, that is the end of it. But Fate cannot let go of the idea.

Of course, the reader of *2666* is—at least on the outset—likewise motivated by the totalizing drive. The ambitious character in the literary novel, says Brooks, “stands as a figure of the reader’s efforts to construct meanings in ever-larger wholes, to totalize his experience of human existence in time, to grasp past, present, and future in a significant shape” (1984: 39). The reader repeats the hermeneutic activities on the diegetic level.⁶⁶ Tracing the narrator’s presentation of what is known about these characters, the reader follows them in their quest for the vanished author and the ‘truth’ of the murders. Using narrative fragments as scraps of evidence, we aim to synthesize them in order to reconstruct ‘what really happened’. When reading ‘for the end,’ all events are essentially incomplete until a final moment of resolution is reached. In *2666*, however, this eventual totalization is frustrated by interminability. Interminable narration, I argue in what follows, effectuates a sense of information overload that belongs to the aesthetics of the sublime. We can explain this by way of the idea of the *infinite* as it figures in the sublime as theorized by Edmund Burke, who was inspired in this idea by John Locke (1991). Then in the idea of the infinite we find the link to the monumental that was missing in the Longinian sublime.

66 In a sense, all the characters in *2666* are detectives. Tzvetan Todorov (1971) claimed that the detective story, departing from the retrospective question ‘whodunnit?’ is the ultimate story, because it dramatizes the double logic that underlies narrativity—of *story*, the chronological sequence of events, and *plot*, how these events are ordered in the text. The plot of the investigation where the sleuth tries to reconstruct the story of the crime is *in praesentia* for the reader; the story of the crime, the ‘what really happened,’ on the other hand, is *in absentia*. The sleuth treads in the footsteps of the criminal, repeating the ground covered by the latter. His endeavors are followed by the reader who tries to reconstruct the story out of the scraps of textual ‘evidence’ the plot offers. According to Todorov, the detective, going over the steps of the criminal, is literalizing an act that all narratives perform: a repetition and rehearsal of something that is supposed to have happened *before*. At the same time this preceding story is constructed in, and by, the narrative we are reading.

2.1.2 The Artificial Infinite

According to Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1759), the experience of the sublime invokes the idea of the infinite. The infinite in itself cannot be perceived or represented, since in the empirical world around us everything is finite. It can only manifest itself as an illusion: there is, therefore, only a *suggestion* of infinity when one is confronted with apparently boundless land- or seascapes. Therefore, Burke qualifies the term "artificial infinity" in order to denote the our experience of over-sized objects whose bounds we cannot perceive. Such objects "impress the imagination with an idea of their progress beyond their actual limits" (1990: II: IX, 68). Boundlessness is suggested, for instance, when we see a succession of similar parts, e.g. a line of dots or long rows of columns in a temple. The imagination cannot take in this object all at once: "a perfect unity can no more be arrived at, than . . . a compleat [sic] whole to which nothing may be added" (II: VII, 66-7). The result is a suggestion of indefinite progression, a potentially endless process of multiplication and expansion. The imagination is caught in an open-ended, consecutive reproduction of the object's parts. Thus the idea of the infinite will always require fulfillment.

As Kiene Brillenburg Wurth (2009) explains, Burke has derived his idea of the infinite as an open-ended succession of similar parts from John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689). Here, Locke observes:

Everyone that has any *idea* of any stated lengths of space, as a foot, finds that he can repeat that *idea*; and joining it to the former, make the *idea* of two feet; and by the addition of a third, three feet; and so on, without ever coming to an end of his additions, whether the same *idea* of a foot, or, if he pleases, of doubling it, or any other *idea* he has of any length, as a mile, or diameter of the earth, or of the *orbis magnus*: for whichsoever of these he takes, and how often soever he doubles or any otherwise multiplies it, he finds that, after he has continued his doubling in his thoughts and enlarged his *idea* as much as he pleases, he has no more reason to stop, nor is one jot nearer the end of such addition than he was at first setting out: the power of enlarging his *idea* of space by further additions remaining still the same, he hence takes *the idea of infinite space*. (Locke 1991: II, XVII: 96)

Locke's idea of the infinite is based on experience. We notice that our mental capacity to multiply similar ideas remains unbounded, even if, or *because*, we never get 'one jot nearer' the end of this process. The reader who remembers the digressions and regressions of Sterne's

Tristram Shandy—who, wanting to be comprehensive, explores so many narrative by-ways and regressions that his autobiography ended four years before his birth—will expect that the Lockean infinite has its parallel in interminable narration. I work out this parallel in detail below, but for now I want to bring across this theoretical point: the realization that we could indefinitely go on adding one step after another, without ever progressing, prompts the *idea* of infinity.

This Lockean idea of infinity is furthermore informed by *divisibility*. What can be multiplied into seemingly infinite parts can be divided into just as many parts: “All the *ideas* that are considered as having parts, and are capable of increase by the addition of any equal or less parts, afford us, by their repetition, the *idea* of infinity” (Locke 1991: II, XVII, 98). Ideas that can be extended without end include space, number, and duration. When we are confronted with partial representations, a number of fragments that we cannot synthesize to a ‘total picture,’ the power of the imagination operates in a space of *suspension*, indefinitely postponing the determination of a form. Since this Lockean and Burkean idea of the infinite provokes anticipation without end, Brillenburg Wurth has aptly described the indeterminacy that stems from it as a “felt presence of absence” (40). This imaginary space of suspension evokes the ‘presence of an absence’ and is an important part of monumental novels like *2666*, which refuse to materialize as a finished form.

Upon a closer look at the interminability of *2666*’s narrative structures, we notice that a Burkean ‘artificial infinite’ goes a long way to explain its effect. What is said about the writing of Benno von Archimboldi, the ‘major writer’ in the novel, also rings true for Bolaño’s text as a whole: “[t]he style was strange. The writing was clear and sometimes even transparent, but the way the stories followed one after another didn’t lead anywhere” (887). On the micro-narrative level, digressions are caused by run-on sentences. As an example, I quote one sentence (in Free Indirect Discourse) from a speech by one of the most verbose characters in the novel, Florita Almada (‘La Santa’), a popular seer who is invited on TV to share her view on the killings:

But it made her even more frightened and angry, and this she had to say here, in front of the cameras, on Reinaldo’s lovely show, so fittingly called *An Hour with Reinaldo*, a nice, wholesome program that gave everyone a chance to laugh and enjoy themselves and learn something new in the process, because Reinaldo was a cultured young man and he always took the trouble to find interesting young guests, a singer, a painter, a retired fire-eater from Mexico City, an interior designer, a ventriloquist and his dummy, a mother of fifteen children, a composer of romantic ballads, and now that she was here, she said,

it was her duty to take this opportunity to speak of other things, by which she meant that she couldn't talk about herself, she couldn't let herself succumb to that temptation of the ego, that frivolity, which might not be frivolity or sin or anything of the sort if she were a girl of seventeen or eighteen, but would be unforgiveable in a woman of seventy, although my life, she said, could furnish material for seventy novels or at least a soap opera, but God and especially the blessed Virgin would deliver her from talking about herself, Reinaldo will have to forgive me, he wants me to talk about myself, but there's something more important than me and my so-called miracles, which aren't miracles, as I never get tired of saying, but the fruit of many years of reading and handling plants, in other words my miracles are the product of work and observation, and, possible, I say *possibly*, also of a natural talent, said Florita. (458-59)

'La Santa' obviously wants to address an urgent subject, but her sentence trails off and terminates before she even reaches this subject. Besides a comical effect – when digressions are allowed to take over to this extent, we get the impression of a slightly deranged mind – the sense imparted on the reader is that a sentence like this could go on indefinitely. Run-on sentences are built on a principle of expandability.

On several occasions, moreover, we also find this effect of the (artificial) infinite in enumerations, stringing narrative elements together with a repeated syntactical function like 'and;' or 'also:'. To select only one out of endless examples:

Life is shit, thought Pelletier in astonishment, all of it. And then: if we hadn't teamed up, she would be mine now. And then: if there hadn't been mutual understanding and friendship and affinity and alliance, she would be mine now. And a little later: if there hadn't been anything, I wouldn't even have met her. And: I might have met her, since each of us has an independent interest in Archimboldi that doesn't spring from our mutual friendship. And: it's possible, too, that she might have hated me, found me pedantic, cold, arrogant, narcissistic, an intellectual elitist. (57-8)

Besides these basic digressions found on the level of the individual sentence, the end of each book is pushed forward by the internal multiplication of stories. Bolaño's writing stands out for its inclusion of numerous subplots, fragments, and autonomous storylines for

different minor characters. Culminating in Book V with the lengthy reproduction of the found manuscript of a fictional Jewish author's diary, each section of 2666 is increasingly a collection of stories within a story. This manuscript itself subsequently breaks down into a number of side-stories.⁶⁷ It follows that there are stories-within-stories-within-stories, such as one, embedded within "The Part About the Critics," of a Swabian literary critic who claims to have met Archimboldi, and, on yet a further level of diegesis, reproduces a story told on that occasion by an old widow about a young Argentinean gaucho (17-23). As an effect of all these acts of embedding, the object sought after – be it Archimboldi or the meaning of the crimes – is ever further put out of reach. This object seems to always remain at a remove, a certain number of diegetic levels away (1+1+1). These levels, and thus the distance to the desired object, only increase as the search continues. In their quest for 'what really happened,' all that the characters find is *more stories*, one after the other, in a linear fashion.⁶⁸

This hostility to closure does not exclusively reside with verbose and eccentric characters like La Santa. The narrator partakes in it as well, by introducing characters with a lot of aplomb and then never revisiting them. Thus, in "The Part About the Crimes," for instance, the arrival of FBI master-detective Albert Kessler is announced as an important event with respect to the solution of the crimes. But after a few press conferences, a tour of the city, and some general aphorisms, we never read about this character again. Time and again, the narrator zooms in on details that appear unimportant and turn out, in a negative *peripeteia*, to be indeed irrelevant. It soon becomes impossible to determine what details *matter* when 'reading for the plot.'

Thus the author treads in the footsteps of his characters (the Archimboldians, the journalist, the philosophy professor, the detectives), that all follow the trail of the vanished writer and the serial killer. The reader, as third-remove detective, follows their lead. The effect of interminable narration is very close to Locke's description of the idea of the infinite, in that the reader seems to never get 'one jot closer'

67 A second example of a longer embedded narrative is the inclusion, in Book II, of the letters Amalfitano receives from his wife Lola. Shorter examples include the many reproductions of the plots of movies, and the story of Jasper Johns, an avant-gardist painter who cuts off his own hand to use it as the center-piece of one of his paintings, and then goes insane.

68 One should not confuse this structure of interminable narration with postmodern constructions like the Borgesian Chinese Box, since the latter, as Brian McHale (1987) writes, usually invoke a heterogeneity of parallel story-worlds, with recursive loops between them that create ontological impossibilities (for instance, Borges's 'forking paths' cannot both be taken as they stand for mutually exclusive realities) (112-30). The interminable narration of the monumental novels I study, on the other hand, is radically linear, and the stories all take part in the same, rather realistic, story-world.

to a solution. Stories and sub-stories keep following up on each other in a seemingly unbridled addition of narrative elements ('and:;' 'also:'), creating the impression that the book continues beyond its covers. It is extraordinary for literature to evoke the sublime in this structural-material way. Earlier, literary texts would reference the sublime thematically (e.g. Romantic poetry), or evoke the sublime as a feeling of terror (e.g. the gothic novel), or in the breakdown of the signifying potential of language (e.g. Thomas Pynchon's *V* (1963)). Monumental novels like *2666*, by contrast, evoke the sublime not in its representations, but in the manner of its presentation. The sublime here becomes a performative (and quantitative) effect.

Interminability makes the monumental novel into the literary equivalent of Umberto Eco's "visual list" (2009), a picture containing such over-abundance that it seems to go on beyond the frame. Significantly, such pictures were popular during the late Renaissance, when a vast accumulation of knowledge and the publication of an increasing number of books led to an 'early modern information overload' (Rosenberg 2003: 1-9). The paintings by Giuseppe Arcimboldo are examples of such visual lists. In *2666*, his paintings are referenced by way of the author Archimboldi's name and described by a character as "everything in everything" (137).⁶⁹ Arcimboldo's paintings form an instructive counterpoint to the structures of the monumental novel. They offer solutions to the problem of representing the infinite that are not available to those who negotiate the page's space rather than a blank canvas. By comparison, Bolaño's artificial infinite is effectuated by a linear seriality. It is the dazzling effect of narrative fragments following up on each other to the point of becoming exchangeable. This narrative abundance invokes experientially the idea of infinite divisibility that Locke put forward as the Janus-head of infinite multiplication.⁷⁰ The resulting impression makes for a disorienting experience; it's no wonder then that key words in *2666*'s critical reception include "dizzying," "dazzling,"

69 This phrasing, "everything in everything," seems to be a reference to one of the practitioners of 'infinite' list from the Renaissance: Athanasius Kircher's *Ars magna sciendi*, a treatise that makes analogy the basis for the combinatory method: "minima in maximis, media in inimis, supremisque, suprema in mediis, inimisque," that is, in brief, "[o]mnia in omnibus" (Kuhlmann, *Quirini Kuhlmanni Kircheriana de Arte magna Sciendi sive Combinatoria, admirabilibus quibusdam Inventis, Sapiencia Infusa, Adamaea Salomonaevaque*, 1681, Qtd. in Johnson 2013: 1138).

70 Given this paradox of interminability, the monumental novel can be seen as an instantiation of what Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, in *The Science of Logic*, has called the bad (or false) infinite: an illusion of boundlessness evoked by the imagination being on the go without being able to stop, without ever noticeably progressing (1969: 118-20). Blanchot evokes this Hegelian 'bad infinite' through the spatial metaphor of a prison. Since the finite is closed off, he writes, there is still hope for escape. The infinite vastness, by contrast, is a prison from which there no escape, no exit, since it envelops all (2003: 94).

“maddening,” and “vertigo.”⁷¹

The idea of the artificial infinite is vital if we want to understand the effect of interminable narration in the monumental novel. Yet the Burkean sublime falls short of accounting for the sublime aesthetics of *2666*, since it also posits a final moment of ‘delight,’ a relief of tension that occurs when the subject realizes that the apparently boundless object does not pose a real threat to her physical well-being (1990: I, VII: 36). Readers and characters of *2666* experience the tension but never reach the point of release.

2.1.3 The Mathematical Sublime

Now that I have established the role of the artificial infinite in the sublime aesthetic of the monumental novel, I turn to Immanuel Kant’s definition of the sublime. Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilkraft* (*Critique of (the Power of) Judgment* or *Third Critique*, 1790) will provide me with the terminology for a more technical mapping of the transition from the ‘opposing forces’ of totalization and interminability to the sublime. Unlike the Kantian judgment of beauty, the object of which is bounded in perception, the sublime is evoked by a formless totality, like the boundlessness (*Unbegrenztheit*) of phenomena in nature. It surpasses one’s powers of perception and, by extension, of one’s imagination. Faced with the sublime, one deals with an idea that can only be thought by reason, such as the world (the totality of all that is), the undividable, the absolutely big and absolute power.

In the present context, I limit the discussion to Kant’s category of the mathematical sublime.⁷² The experience of the mathematical sublime is triggered by an object that is apparently immeasurable, or ‘absolutely big.’ In our estimation of an object of such magnitude, Kant distinguishes a mathematical and an aesthetic mode. The first entails an estimation by means of numbers; the second an immediate, intuitive grasp of elements as a coherent whole. The mathematical mode is relative and could therefore go on indefinitely. Since “the power of numbers extends to infinity,” I can always add one unit to the sum (2008 §26: 95). Therefore, when faced with a seemingly boundless object, the imagination does manage to take in (*Auffassung*) each separate part of the object, one after the other (1+1+1...). Kant calls this mental operation *apprehensio*, the apprehension of subsequent parts that can go on ad infinitum (§26: 95).

71 Resp. Gleason 2010; Hanks 2009: 55; Amis 2009; Deckard 2012:364.

72 The other mode of the sublime that Kant distinguishes is the dynamical sublime, which arises when we are confronted with the force of nature. Before the magnitude of savage nature, the imagination, striving to bring coherence into this chaos, breaks down and falls back in frustration. Yet, through this confrontation we become aware of the independence of our faculty of practical reason, which warrants the ethical superiority of man. (§25; 26, 131-43)

The aesthetic mode of estimating magnitude, however, is not satisfied with 'counting' parts and it seeks to attain a totalizing presentation. The aesthetic estimation of magnitude corresponds to an act that Kant calls comprehension (*comprehensio aesthetica*), an idea of absolute totality (§27: 102). The imagination tries to synthesize (*Zusammenfassung*) the apprehended parts in one totalizing presentation: however, this becomes harder the further apprehension advances, until finally imagination reaches its limits, and must give up.

. . . [S]oon it attains to its maximum, viz. the greatest possible aesthetical fundamental measure for the estimation of magnitude. For when apprehension has gone so far that the partial representations of sensuous intuition at first apprehended begin to vanish in the imagination, while this ever proceeds to the apprehension of others, then it loses as much on the one side as it gains on the other; and in comparison there is a maximum beyond which it cannot go. (§26: 89-90)

For Kant, as for Burke and Locke before him, such a seemingly boundless object invokes the idea of infinity. In Kant's analytic, this idea can only be thought by the supersensory faculty of theoretical reason (§26: 98-99).

I can now compare the mathematical sublime with elements of the monumental novel, especially where digressions threaten to take over the plot as the basic organizing principle. Narrative totalization corresponds to the rational act that Kant called comprehension, and both are problematized when stories reach a certain length and number. Totalization is the drive to encapsulate (*Zusammenfassen*) the parts, while interminable narrativity, based on a principle of expandability (1+1+1), ensures that a literary form remains open-ended. As I have argued, principles of multiplication and expansion render it increasingly challenging to distinguish a narrative fragment from its predecessors and to determine its relation to the whole.

What remains possible at all times, however, is a successive mode of apprehending the many fragments. Alluding to media theorist Wolfgang Ernst who reminds us of the etymological kinship between *zählen* and *erzählen* (a connection I address at more length in the next section which considers database structures in 2666), we could say that such interminability in literature reduces *recounting* to *counting*. Neil Hertz points to this dimension of the Kantian sublime in *The End of the Line* (1985):

Kant's mathematical sublime – arising out of sheer cognitive exhaustion, the mind blocked not by the threat of an overwhelming force, but by the fear of losing count or of being reduced to nothing but counting – this and this and this –with no hope of bringing a long series or a vast scattering under some sort of conceptual unity. (40)

This is an apt description of how the monumental novel reduces reading to counting. When I put great mental effort in wrapping my mind around one part of 2666's multiplicity of narratives (in an act of *Aufassung*) and then combine it with the next, the first cluster of narratives has already lost its clear outline in my mind. As a reader, I face aesthetic and conceptual overload. At all times an excess remains, a 'beyond' that is left out of the synthesis of my reading. This effect is of course relevant to the reader's point of view. In Kant's example (§27) the Great Pyramid in Egypt can indeed be viewed as a whole from a certain distance. By analogy, possible ways of capturing all these narratives together include mapping them visually or performing a quantifying 'distant reading' (Moretti 2013) of a single novel – possibilities I discuss below. The problem only arises when I want to capture them as a whole in the linear mode that the novel imposes.

Besides the technical vocabulary of apprehension and comprehension that allows us to analyze how textual overload occurs in the monumental novel, the Kantian analytic brings to my understanding of 2666 the notion of the aesthetic idea. In Kant's definition, the aesthetic idea is "that representation of the imagination which gives much to think about, but without any determinate thought, i.e. *concept* being able to be adequate to it, which consequently no language can completely attain and make comprehensible" (2008 B193). The meaningful content of a work is presented in its aesthetic ideas, which are marked by a creative inexhaustibility, and therefore central to the 'unboundedness' of the sublime. No concept can be adequate to the intuition of such an aesthetic idea (just as no intuition can be adequate to demonstrate an Idea of reason) (see Van de Vall 1994).⁷³

Finally, even though the theme of 'overload' will prove to be of central importance to a more contemporary sublime in the monumental novel, the Kantian mathematical sublime (like the Burkean sublime) only 'works' for the monumental novel up to a certain point. Where Burke's sublime relies on the primacy of emotion over intellect, Kant's sublime supposes the ultimate victory of reason, which is affirmed as a guarantor of man's "supersensible destination" (§29: 108). It is a sublime of the intellect which Thomas Weiskel (1976) calls, appropriately, a

⁷³ The next subsection will take up this notion of the aesthetic idea as it was furthered by Romanticism.

reader's or hermeneutical sublime (29). "The real motive or cause of the [mathematical] sublime," he suggests,

is not efficient but teleological; we are ultimately referred not to the failure of empirical imagination but to reason's project in requiring this failure. The cause of the sublime is the *aggrandizement of reason at the expense of reality and the imaginative apprehension of reality*. (41)

Reason allows us to see 'the full picture' even when it cannot be imagined or represented. Kant's story finds its happy ending in "the mere ability to think which shows a faculty of mind surpassing every standard of sense" (Kant §25: 82). As Brillenburg Wurth has demonstrated, both the Kantian and Burkean sublime have a *narrative* structure consisting of "rest, crisis, and (climactic resolution)" (6).

The ending of Kant's story, this supersensible moment when reason saves the day, is notably lacking in novels like *2666*.⁷⁴ Determination of the narrative form is suspended even beyond its end. This fragmentary character is stressed by the fact that the five books are specifically categorized as 'parts,' and not chapters. The emphasis on their partiality foreshadows the fact that these parts do not form a whole; that the 'synecdoche' does not add up to its presumed synthesis. Santa Teresa, where all the digressive storylines and incalculable events eventually lead, does not function as a point of convergence but rather as a spatial and temporal *vanishing point*, a literal plot-hole.

74 David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) poses an interesting contrast to *2666*, as a monumental novel where initially fragmented storylines do come together. This work is made up of six stories that range from different times (from 1850 to a post-apocalyptic future) and places, each connected by the inclusion of a character with a cloud-shaped birth mark, who all turn out to be reincarnations of each other. Each tale is read (or observed) by the main character in the next. The first five stories are interrupted at a key moment. After the sixth story, the other five stories are returned to and closed, in reverse chronological order, and each ends with the main character reading or observing the chronologically previous work in the chain. Unlike in *2666*, the suspension created by the stories that are left off, is only temporary. In the end, the middle stories (like synecdoche's) reunite seamlessly into an organic whole. The same argument can be made about Eleanor Catton's *The Luminaries* (2013), an 832-page novel about fortune-seekers at New Zealand's goldfields in 1866. The novel is centered on a series of unsolved crimes, and the book is constructed around the 12 zodiac signs, corresponding to the 12 main characters. While this is a complex and demanding plot construction, the last chapters fill in every last detail and neatly tie all the storylines together.

2.2 From Romanticism to Big Data

2.2.1 The Romantic sublime

The avoidance of this final resolution in the totalizing work of reason from the mathematical sublime automatically puts me on the trail of Romanticism. The early (Jena) Romantics took over Kant's notion of the aesthetic ideas and made it the pillar of their aesthetic theory; thus "Kant opens up the possibility of romanticism" (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1988: 29). Rather than giving the last word to the category of reason, the Romantics aspired to totality through the faculty of the imagination, and declared literature superior to philosophy because of its ability to present the unrepresentable through aesthetic ideas. As Alan Liu writes in *Local Transcendence*, "Romantic imagination was a mediation between the worldly and otherworldly whose definitive act was the simulation of transcendental release. . . . Mind was the visionary medium that coded the world as otherworldly" (2008: 110). Whereas Kant posed the sublime as a reminder of the failure of representation to be adequate to the supersensuous, and therefore deemed it fruitless to look for this supersensuous within the sensuous, this is precisely what the early Romantics believed: "that the sensuous seems by its inherent incompleteness to point beyond the sensuous" (Bowie 2003: 46)—in other words, to the infinite.⁷⁵

This Romantic turn-around of Kantian philosophy towards the aesthetic idea is highly relevant to 2666. When we revisit the strivings of the main characters of these 'parts,' it becomes clear that their intended syntheses never materialize. The literary critics of the first book, for example, never get closer to knowing their author's identity or whereabouts. Having followed his ghostly presence to Santa Teresa, they are stranded at a hotel, on the verge of madness; Espinoza starts an affair with a thirteen-year-old girl, while Pelletier manically re-reads three Archimboldi novels *ad infinitum*.⁷⁶ Then these protagonists, too, simply

⁷⁵ Even though the productive power of the imagination is endless in Romantic theory, the Romantic sublime will eventually elevate the poet's individuality and genius to the status of a truth surpassing all dogma, thus somewhat stabilizing the endless movement of *Sehnsucht* by giving it a center. James Kirwan notes that Romanticism is marked by "a feeling that the world is too small for the self, that is the badge of genius" (2005: 121). Although Romantic transcendence is centered on the power of the imagination rather than that of reason, in the last instance it follows the Kantian sublime in rendering the sensuous and the corporeal subservient to a transcendent, individual consciousness and an autonomous subject. Thus William Wordsworth reverses the Kantian sublime by making reason reach its limits, against which the imagination is posed as transcendent: in the *Prelude* (1850) he writes of the loss of the "light of sense" within the luminosity of "a flash that has revealed / The invisible world, doth greatness make abode" (1996, XI: 145, lines 602 - 603). Thus the Romantic sublime, too, tends to end on a note of consolation.

⁷⁶ The remaining two critics, Norton and Morini, *do* attain a sense of closure, indeed a very traditional narrative 'happy ending.' This ending, however, was never expected

vanish from the pages, never to return. In a similar act of suspension, Oscar Fate never construes his intended 'full picture' of the femicides. He falls in love with Amalfitano's daughter, Rosa, and before he knows it, he is tangled up in the underworld of Santa Teresa. Before 'his' part of the book ends, he must flee the town: "What used to be my right is my left, and there are no points of reference. Everything is erased" (348). The reader is left with a character-shaped void.

In striving to mentally encompass larger wholes that seem boundless (e.g. the mysteries surrounding Archimboldi and the femicides), characters leave behind the faculty of reason for an endless creative reproduction of aesthetic ideas by the imagination. What begins as a fact-finding mission culminates in disintegration and self-destructive abandon. Upon arrival in Santa Teresa characters turn to alcohol, visit underage prostitutes, are plagued by nightmares, or generally descend into madness and paranoia. The ability to perceive totalities escapes rationalization: it lies with artists, murderers, and the clinically insane, all of whom have a hard time communicating these totalities, because no concepts of reason are adequate to them.

The desire for a presupposed whole that cannot be attained makes 2666 a quintessentially, albeit self-reflexively, Romantic novel. After all, Romanticism is characterized by an appreciation of looser plot structures and the acceptance of incomplete and "open" forms that could be added to indefinitely (McFarland 1981). In literature and art, as we know, the fragment is the Romantic form *par excellence*, as opposed to the closed-off forms of classicism (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 40). The Romantic fragment expresses the aspiration for the infinite within a finite, discrete, and sequential medium (Rauber 1969: 212-13, 215). Part of a larger whole which is absent⁷⁷ and inapprehensible, the fragment converts the bounded into the boundless. Fragments in literature "simultaneously

in medias res: 'life happened,' we could say, when they were too busy pursuing other goals. They find love and live happily ever after together; this ending saves Norton, who returned from Santa Teresa before her two colleagues, from losing her mind.

⁷⁷ 2666 features several metonymies for its whole-in-parts that does not add up. These include mentions of worn statues of Greek goddesses (exemplifying the totality of the classic body), which, over time have eroded and lost body parts. In one of Pelletier's dreams, for instance, "a statue emerged from the bottom of the metallic sea. A formless chunk of stone, gigantic, eroded by time and water, through a hand, a wrist, part of a forearm could still be made out with total clarity. And this statue came out of the sea and rose above the beach and it was horrific and at the same time very beautiful" (2666: 79). And at one point Hans Reiter spots a statue of a Greek goddess in a Polish forest during the battle for the capture of Chornomorske (703). Significantly, a similarly synecdochal or indexical picture is given by the mention of mutilated bodies of women in Part IV: e.g., the repeated mention of bitten-off nipples of the victims. According to Susan Stewart, the "severing of the synecdoche from its referent, or whole," for instance when "objects [are] separable from the body," is a characteristic of depictions of the gigantic: here, "[t]he partial vision of the observer prohibits closure of the object" (2005: 89).

raise and resists the possibility of totality and wholeness, exhibiting a presentational force that can never be exhausted and [destabilizing] a clear sense of the limits and borders of a text" (221).

Because of its indetermination, the overall structure of *2666* can be read along the same aesthetic lines of the Romantic fragment. Much like the characters confined to their separate parts of the story, the reader is only able to perceive fragments of a totality. In the end we are left with a gap between one book and the next. Brooks has pointed out that it is our ambition as readers to "totalize [our] experience of human existence in time" (1984: 39). But how does one accomplish this when the text at hand tosses its plot-driving characters away before their stories end? The reader should take heed when the master Archimboldi is praised for being "a person who didn't pretend to reconcile the irreconcilable" (105). Ironically, real-life literary critics such as William Deresiewicz have critiqued *2666* precisely because it "does not hold together" and "finally lacks a unifying emotional impulse" (2009). These critics reveal their expectations of Kantian comprehension and thereby repeat the misguided synthesizing ambitions of the characters. They fall into the trap of wanting to reconcile the irreconcilable.

The infinite suspension of the sublime's 'happy ending' in monumental novels is an instance of Romantic *Sehnsucht*, a longing for the infinite that can repeat itself infinitely because it is determined to prevent its own realization (Brillenburg Wurth 2009: 47). With *Sehnsucht*, revolving around expansion and characterized by a fugitive rhythm (52), I finally arrive at a truly interminable structure of the sublime. In *2666*, a character Oscar Amalfitano embodies this fugitive rhythm. Amalfitano is a Chilean Philosophy professor at the university of Santa Teresa, whose experience, like Bolaño's, is marked by exile. Unlike the other parts which, as noted, derail *in medias res*, the structure of "Book II: The Part About Amalfitano" is destabilized from the very first sentences:

I don't know what I'm doing in Santa Teresa, Amalfitano said to himself after he'd been living in the city for a week. Don't you? Don't you really? Really I don't, he said to himself, and that was as eloquent as he could be.
(163)

Amalfitano has been forced to move from his home country to Barcelona, and then (for unmentioned reasons) to flee Spain for Mexico. In a conversation with the European critics, he describes exile as "a natural movement, something that, in its way, helps to abolish fate." When the teleological-minded Pelletier replies that exile must be "full of inconveniences, of skips and breaks that essentially keep recurring and interfere with anything you try to do that's important," Amalfitano

answers: "That's just what I mean with abolishing fate" (117).⁷⁸ He is the prototypical wanderer, who lives like Bolaño writes: repeatedly venturing into sideways, avoiding the linear route to the end in a vain attempt to out-run fate. Whereas the other characters are goal-oriented, driven by certain ambitions that propel the narrative forward, Amalfitano is closest to the (un-)form of 2666.

Amalfitano's incoherence can be explained by the fact that he has no 'narrative' sense of self. He misses a firm grasp of the continuity of a subjectivity that was there in the past, is still the same person in the present, and will still be there in the future. He is what psychologist Galen Strawson (2004) would call an 'episodic,' a person that conceives of his life as a series of discrete events, and sees himself as different people at the time of each event. Unlike 'diachronics,' people that see their life as a single narrative with their self as the unchanging protagonist, "Episodics are likely to have no particular tendency to see their life in Narrative terms" (430). In Amalfitano's case, this means that he does not succeed in thinking causal relations. His episodic nature makes him a vignette for the shift from narrative to the database with which monumental novels formally experiment. His episodic character is highlighted when he finds a geometry book by Rafael Diestes that he does not remember receiving or buying. The question 'how did I get here?' is then rephrased as 'how did I come into possession of this book?'

Unable to answer these questions by narrative means of 'filling in the gaps,' he decides to copy Marcel Duchamp. He creates a ready-made by hanging the book from a clothesline in his backyard — a literal act of suspension — "so that the wind could go through the book, choose its own problems, turn and tear out the pages" (191).⁷⁹ Notions of *Sehnsucht*, exile, and digression touched upon so far in my analysis, all come together in this image of the book dangling from the clothesline. From the moment of this act of suspension, Amalfitano willfully relinquishes control over his own mental operations. In a final defeat of reason that surpasses the Kantian sublime, he lets the elements determine the 'meaning' of the geometry book for him. The sublime here is an idea of chance, a throw of the dice. This indefinite suspension, however, is not altogether a positive experience for Amalfitano, as it would be for a Romantic.

The difference with Romanticism becomes clear when I consider the novel's suspended ending. In the final lines Archimboldi, the artist-to-come, sets out for Santa Teresa: "the next morning he was on his way

78 At another point, Amalfitano claims that his own mental ramblings "turned flight into freedom, even if freedom meant no more than the perpetuation of flight" (189), which is also an apt description of the workings of digressive narration.

79 As Brillenburg Wurth notes, suspense (from the Latin: *suspendere* meaning 'to hang, stop') connotes 'delay' or 'deferral' with a resonance 'hanging' (loosely) or 'dangling,' because of the Latin relation to *pendere* (which means 'to cause to hang, weigh') (2009: 49).

to Mexico" (893). As the critics went to look for him in Mexico in the first book, this suggests a circular temporality. Importantly, he never arrives. The anticipated restoration of continuity is thus infinitely suspended: like the geometry book, he is left 'hanging' in the air between Europe and Mexico, between Book V and Book I. This makes the movement between end and beginning of the cycle one of *Sehnsucht*, of infinite longing for unity. As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy write, "[f]or the romantics, the work never ceases to imply the fundamental notion of completion" (1988: 46). The fact that 2666 ends with Archiboldi's departure indeed underscores its Romantic structure, with the important difference that the moment of completion that it anticipates does not lie beyond the text, but is contained within its cyclical structure.

2.2.2 Lyotard and the critique of monumentalization

The refusal to materialize as a finished form makes 2666 an instance of Lyotard's postmodern sublime as immanent: a sublime *of*, as opposed to *in* art. In *The Inhuman* (1988), Lyotard describes this postmodern sublime as a break with the familiar forms that the Romantics used to figure the unrepresentable at a great distance, as something residing beyond the horizon of sensuous grasp. The Lyotardian sublime does not refer to something 'beyond' the work of art but resides rather in the manner of presentation, in "what is closest, in the very matrix of artistic work" (1991: 98-9). This describes the interminable structures of 2666. Bolaño, novel, though incomplete, does not refer to another, supersensuous world 'outside' the book. Instead, it is radically immanent. The 'secret' about the killings in Santa Teresa that the detectives are looking for is not elsewhere; it is right in front of us, as Patrick Dove has noted in his article on 2666:

What if the *secret of the world* were not a reference to something that had been hidden from view or passed off as something it is not and which could therefore be brought into the light of day? What if the secret named a withdrawal or hiatus or opacity that was constitutive of all appearing, constitutive of the totality that we call world, and thus before any determinate presence? (2014: 149)

The 'secret' of 2666 is expressed in masses of fragments and snippets of information that constitute an overload: the sense of an absence is brought about by excess.

Lyotard, mainly elaborating on Burke, locates the sublime in the art of the avant-gardes, and recasts the fear of privation as pointing to the possible termination of 'something new' happening:

What is sublime is the feeling that something will happen, despite everything, within this threatening void, that something will take 'place' and will announce that everything is not over. That place is mere 'here,' the most minimal occurrence. (84)

Like the Romantic sublime, the postmodern sublime resides in the inexpressible. Unlike the Romantic sublime, it is not located beyond the work, but rather takes place in the artistic material itself. Suspense in the postmodern sublime is caused by the question 'is it happening?'; delight is caused by the relief *that* 'it happens,' "*dass es geschieht*" (90).⁸⁰

This postmodern sublime can help envision the relation between the sublime and the monumental as a process of canonization. Since the question as to 'does it happen,' or the "*Arrive-t-il?*" (1983: 121) evokes fear and restlessness, and since we can never know what the occurrence or *Ereignis* will be, we tend to anticipate it. This is, for instance, what institutions of art and literature do when they construct systems, programs, and theories: they forget the 'It happens,' the *Il y a*, and ask *what* there is instead (1983: 101). They determine the indeterminable and forget about the remainder, instead of allowing for the "indeterminate to appear as a question-mark" (1991: 91). Lyotard points to the ideologically dangerous consequences of such a determination, offering the example of the link between neoromantic artistic preferences and the politics of myth associated with World War II:

neo-romantic, neo-classical and symbolic forms imposed by the cultural commissars and collaborationist artists — painters and musicians especially — had to block the negative dialectic of the *Is it happening?*, by translating and betraying the question as a waiting for some fabulous subject or identity: 'Is the pure people coming?', 'Is the Führer coming?', 'Is Siegfried coming?' The aesthetics of the sublime, thus neutralized and converted into a politics of myth, was able to come and build its architectures of human 'formations' on the Zeppelin Feld in Nurnberg. (1991: 104)

In *2666*, the question is rephrased as 'Is Archimboldi coming?' Living in a fragmented story-world, the characters of *2666*, especially the literary critics, project the uncertainty of the *Arrive-t-il?* on the master-writer. With this character, Bolaño personifies the monumental as the link between

80 As Brillenburg Wurth argues, Lyotard's postmodern sublime, though immanent, is still marked by a narrative structure (2009: 7). There is a sense of relief following the 'it happens' that lends the experience at least a provisional sense of closure.

bigness and greatness. As an answer to 2666's world-out-of-joint, Archimboldi stands for the Romantic promise of a restoration of unity. Because of his impressive length, he forms the perfect distraction for the sublimely indeterminate. In this respect it is telling that Archimboldi starts out as a Romantic giant⁸¹ who lives in harmony with the Prussian seascape, and later becomes a Wehrmacht soldier. His arrival in Santa Teresa is eagerly anticipated, not only by the literary critics, but also by his nephew, the presumed serial killer who announces that "a giant is coming and the giant is going to kill you" (Bolaño 2008: 481). The dubious ideological underpinnings of his monumentalization cause a continuous ambivalence surrounding this character which makes it impossible for the reader to decide whether he is a good or a bad human being, and a genius or a mediocre writer.⁸²

The Lyotardian sublime enables me to draw a critique of monumentalization from 2666. Monumentalizing an artist (or, as we will see below, a villain) is an answer to the sublime, at once a neutralizer and a solvent. The monumental author is here created as a keystone to fill in the many gaps and incommensurabilities in 2666's narrative arcs. Bolaño's thematization of the giant author-figure entails a warning against the practice of rendering artists 'larger than life,' which is also applicable to Bolaño's own afterlife, and his appropriation by the Anglophone literary industry as a Romantic hero. In this respect, Bolaño has written a monumental novel that dismantles the logic of commodified monumentality (including his own monumentality) *from within*. Lyotard's theory brings insight in the relation between the sublime and the monumental, by illuminating how monumental figures like heroes and monsters function as a way of binding, amalgamating an overload of data. Thus, the novel presents a 'datafied' society that looks back to Romanticism for consoling fictions of monumentality.

81 The inclusion of a giant is one of Edward Mendelson's proposed characteristics of 'encyclopedic narratives' (1976): "All encyclopedias provide an image of their own scale by including giants or gigantism: the giants who guard the pit of hell in Dante, the eponymous heroes of Rabelais, the windmills that Don Quixote takes for giants, the mighty men whom Faust sends into battle, Moby-Dick himself, the stylistic gigantism of Joyce's "Cyclops," and, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the titans under the earth and the angel over Lübeck whose eyes go "towering for miles." (1271) To these examples, we can add the gigantic underground alligators in Pynchon's *V* (which are referenced in 2666), "The Infant" in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, a baby grown to gigantic proportions, who roams the sewers crying for its mother and leaving big piles of feces, and Archimboldi.

82 The reader of 2666 cannot decide for his- or herself whether or not Archimboldi is even a modestly good writer, since his writing is never presented by Bolaño and his books are only described in the vaguest of terms, and somewhat paradoxically: "*The Blind Woman* . . . was about a blind woman who didn't know she was blind and some clairvoyant detectives who didn't know they were clairvoyant" (847). "*The Black Sea*, a theatre piece or a novel written in dramatic form, in which the Black Sea converses with the Atlantic Ocean an hour before Dawn" (*Ibid.*)

2.2.3 A sublime of data overload

Thus far I have mapped the influence of Romanticism (in the fragment, *Sehnsucht*, madness, and the authorial genius) on 2666. I have also revisited Burke's, Locke's and Kant theories of the sublime. But I have yet to determine more precisely the characteristics of a contemporary experience of the sublime of data overload. To understand the contemporary guise of the sublime as it manifests itself in database aesthetics, I now proceed to consider how 2666 stages our experiences in an information age, where the fragmentary and boundless are default modes of perception. This default mode goes further than the aesthetic incapacity of comprehension that was the mathematical sublime, when experience 'gets stuck,' so to speak, on the level of counting or apprehension. In the information age, data comprehend *us* and become an immersive environment. The subject immersed in masses of data finds herself unable to divine patterns: to sort signal from noise. I outline this sublime in the present subsection.

As I wrote above, 'big data' denotes current technology's possibilities of processing and transmitting unprecedented amounts of data (so-called 'petabytes'), without the need to sample (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013: 29). When working with such datasets, scholars and companies do not need a pre-determined model or theory: the method is 'hypothesis-free,' so they never know what they are going to find. This is a purposeful-purposeless approach to data. Companies like Google first set out to collect and organize "the world's information" (Vaidhyathan 2011: 2) as a goal in itself, and often find a use for it only at a later stage. As a result, we are witnessing a shift from causality, traditionally important to the sciences and humanities, to correlation. Google does not need to know why a certain website is more popular than another, only that it is so. Big data renders causal or semantic analysis obsolete (Aiden and Michel 2013: 42) and its devotees encourage us to simply "let the numbers speak for themselves" (Anderson 2008: n.p.).

Until the proper processing tools have been developed, such a mass of data causes what is called 'overload'. The management of ever-vaster amounts of information that bombard us daily is one of the most important challenges we have been facing in the last century. Technological developments during this time have drastically changed our abilities of accessing, processing, and transferring information. The problem of managing information overload did not originate with the digital age: the invention of the printing press caused a similar challenge to archival organization.⁸³ Yet, the issue has become pressing again as

83 The historian Daniel Rosenberg has researched the conditions of overload from 1550–1750 when, after the invention of the printing press, Europe was confronted with a vast increase in the production, circulation, and dissemination of texts. (See Rosenberg, "Early Modern Information Overload," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64, 2003, 1–9. Qtd. in Veel

more and more information is dated. Information overload, as Veel defines it, is the situation that arises when “the organizing system breaks down – or does not yet exist, because the information to be processed is so unfamiliar to us that we do not yet have categories available to process it” (308).⁸⁴ The Romantic and Lyotardian sublime thus become a daily reality.

One of the ways in which the monumental novel enacts this breakdown of organizing processes is through the inclusion of meaningless text.⁸⁵ Such a textual redundancy invites reading habits like skimming and skipping, usually associated with the mode of reading of web pages, that Hayles calls ‘hyperattention’ (2010: 72). When reading such passages in a linear fashion, the reader’s attention span is strained. La Santa’s run-on sentence in *2666*, quoted earlier, triggers such a distracted mode of reading – as she rambles on for pages on end about the healing powers of herbs, the divinatory art of botanomancy, the importance of consuming enough vegetable fibers, *etcetera*. Meanwhile her TV audience in the novel, as well as the reader who has to at least skim this associative chain, impatiently await her pronouncements on the murders. Such a lengthy digression also enacts a diversion. Our attention is distracted. But from what? From the valuable information leading us to the truth about the murders, or the fact that such a meaningful solution does not exist? When it is no longer humanly possible to determine meaningful patterns in a large body of text, undecidability occurs. *2666* makes the reader experience this breakdown of the hermeneutic capacity to process information along with its characters.

We can also read Amalfitano’s suspension of the geometry book from a clothesline along these lines. In doing so, he searches for patterns of meaning, albeit aleatory. The wind here functions as an algorithm (a finite list of instructions or ‘rules’ for calculating and processing information)

2011: 309).

84 One instance of such a breakdown in *2666* is found in a lengthy speech by Barry Seaman, founder of the Black Panthers, author of a cookbook on spare-ribs and church preacher. This effusive character has systematically sub-divided his talk into exactly five subjects (DANGER, MONEY, FOOD, STARS, and USEFULNESS). Despite this categorical approach that should create order, the speech details in a meandering from the subject of California housing to a list of statistics on fatal car accidents in Detroit versus LA, and from black people’s aversion to the sea to a step-by-step recipe for *duck à l’orange* (246). Any attempt to construe an order results in randomness; we become aware of the arbitrariness of the categories imposed on the narrative material. If there is an order, it remains hidden and inaccessible to us, since we do not yet know how to process this information.

85 We also find such a staging of distraction by way of an excess of irrelevant details or ‘junk’ textuality in Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000; e.g. chapter IX) and David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1999), and *The Pale King* (2011; e.g. chapter 25). However, where these novels use footnotes and text blocks to disrupt the linearity of the text, *2666*, as I have argued, stretches it to the point of illegibility.

that takes over from Amalfitano himself as a meaning-making agent. As N. Katherine Hayles (2005) has argued, “[w]hether implemented in the computer or not, algorithms embody mathematical procedures and thus are foreign to the kinds of human perceptions represented in traditional narratives” (174). Even though computer culture is not an explicit theme in *2666*, the algorithm becomes a pertinent structural device for a novel whose narrative fragments are so numerous that they cannot be bound in perception and cognition, and can only be estimated in terms of counting. This ‘algorithmic’ reading is further suggested when Amalfitano starts absent-mindedly drawing geometrical figures accompanied by the names of canonical thinkers from the history of philosophy. The answer to the mystery of the geometry book’s origin, he believes, is lodged somewhere in his sub-consciousness – suggesting that, *pace* Kant, the meaning of vast networks can only be grasped when reason is disengaged and distracted. After drawing these diagrams, awakening from a trance, he tries to retrace the patterns between the different elements, as if the secret of their connection would reveal to him his own connection to the *testamento geometrico* and by extension answer the question ‘how did I get here?’ But the diagram offers neither causality nor temporality: only (spatial) correlations.

As a *mise en abyme* of Bolaño’s novel, Amalfitano’s diagrams repeat the reader’s search for her own set of ‘rules’ as to what relations bind the elements in this book. A common function of plots, lists, and diagrams is their imposition of order and coherence on data. But, as is often the case with data visualizations, Amalfitano’s diagrams mostly express the sense of being “in the middle of something”. They underwrite our sense that “[t]here’s a lot we aren’t seeing, that we miss” (Munster 2011: n.p.). Thus the monumental novel performs the problems we face daily when it comes to discriminating between over-determination and randomness, the patterned and the pattern-less.

Jorge-Luís Borges (who in many respects pre-mediated the digital information age) has thematized similar experiences as those rehearsed above in stories such as “The Library of Babel” (1941).⁸⁶ However, where the monumental novel is characterized by expansion, Borges’s writing is famously compressed. In stark contrast to Bolaño’s ‘bigger-is-better’ rhetoric he held that “It is a laborious madness and an impoverishing one, the madness of composing vast books – setting out in five hundred pages an idea that can be perfectly related orally in five minutes.” (1998:

86 This story famously describes a library as big as the universe, containing every possible book – including each book that *could* be written, every possible combination of signs. As Hayles has determined on the basis of the information given by Borges’s narrator, “the number of books in the Library of Babel can be calculated to be of the order of magnitude of 10⁷⁵, a quantity greater than the number of atoms in the universe” (2005a: 180).

67).⁸⁷ Where Borges thematically addressed the experience of being surrounded by all the valuable information one needs without being able to retrieve it, novels like *2666* perform it quantitatively.

Such monumental novels make us aware of our everyday reliance on search engines like Google to make the right connections between data and to filter abundance for us. It is therefore not exactly correct to claim that big data occasions what historian David E. Nye (1994) calls a 'technological sublime.' The technological sublime occasions an eruption of feeling that briefly overpowers reason, but only to be subsequently re-contained by it. According to Nye's mentor Leo Marx, "the rhetoric of the technological sublime" consists of hymns to progress that rise "like froth on a tide of exuberant self-regard sweeping over all misgivings, problems, and contradictions" (1964: 207).⁸⁸ This is a celebratory take on technology as a tool to master the natural world.

In the case of big data, on the contrary, technology is not the source of the sublime feeling, but its designated dissolver. The solution to the frustration caused by overload resides no longer in ourselves, in our emotions (as in Burke), reason (as in Kant) or imagination (as in Romanticism), but in the rather flawed possibilities for creating the right algorithms. "The visionary medium is now Mind in direct interface with silicon," Alan Liu writes, "and the function of the synthetic imagination is once more to allow the world—now corporate, multinational, informatic—to feign the otherworldly" (2008: 110). This completely alters the presumptions regarding the subject experiencing the sublime. Where the Kantian faculty of reason displaced God as an instance writing laws for the subject, in the digital age, computer programs, search engines, and algorithms now feign to 'replace' human reason. The result is a technological sublime without transcendence, whose rules and operations remain unknown to us, a secret like the one at the heart of *2666*. Like human reason, search engines and other tools to help us dissolve this sublime of data are far from perfect and highly speculative. Since big data is by definition *messy* data because of its bulk, knowledge derived from it is at best an estimation. In return for voluminous datasets we sacrifice exactitude (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013: 34). Computer programs apply mathematics to huge quantities of data in order to infer *probabilities*. In addition to overwhelming the human faculties, the growing amount of data thus keeps surpassing existing statistical algorithms, and any result is preliminary at best.

⁸⁷ For a more extensive comparative analysis between Borges, Bolaño and James Joyce, see Novillo-Corvalán 2013.

⁸⁸ Joseph Tabbi extends this argument in *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk* (1995). He reads the work of several postmodern American writers as an attempt to interact with the twentieth-century proliferation of technology in the twentieth century.

The uncertainty that pervades these operations of big data analysis implicitly informs the level of narration in 2666. Here, an anonymous third-person narrator aims at the fullest possible disclosure of minor details. In Book I, for instance, there is mention of all the conferences the critics attend, including years and titles, the titles of the papers they write, courses they teach on Archimboldi, and special issues that are published through the years. Besides professional output, the narrator also has access to biographical information on the characters' lives, feelings and thoughts, and mentions many phone conversations in detail. At first, a reader would logically expect to be dealing with an omniscient narrator. But this hypothesis is falsified when we encounter passages in which the presentation of intimate details is strangely statistic in style. Consider the following description of a phone conversation between two of the critics:

The first twenty minutes were tragic in tone, with the word *fate* used ten times and the word *friendship* twenty-four times. Liz Norton's name was spoken fifty times, nine of them in vain. The word *Paris* was said seven times, *Madrid*, eight. The word *love* was spoken twice, one by each man. The word *horror* was spoken six times and the word *happiness* once (by Espinoza). The word *solution* was said twelve times. The words *solipsism* seven times. The word *euphemism* ten times. The word *category*, in the singular and the plural, nine times. The word *structuralism* once (Pelletier). The term *American literature* three times. The words *dinner* or *eating* or *breakfast* or *sandwich* nineteen times. The words *eyes* or *hands* or *hair* fourteen times. (40-1)

The narrator here performs the age-old practice of concordance, traditionally used to create a book's index of word use. With the emergence of computers, this time-consuming practice of word counting has been rendered obsolete. All it henceforth took was a single line of code, easy to write and run instantaneously. Yet in a sense, concordances are more omnipresent than ever before. After all, as Aiden and Michel write, a search engine is nothing other than a massive digital concordance, a list of words and the pages on the Internet on which those words appear. Concordances "didn't die out Instead, they took over the world" (Aiden and Michel 2013: 48-9). They form the basis of digital tools like Google's N-gram viewer, a graphing application that measures, over a set period, the occurrences of a particular word or phrase (an 'n-gram') in the thirty million volumes that have so far been uploaded to Google Books.

Bolaño's quantitative presentation of information in such passages mimics the manner of presentation of such digital tools of concordance. The narration of 2666 can be interpreted as reflecting the outcome of a narrator's big data mining, providing information about the telephone call in the same way that a search engine provides information about a website. Even when they do not explicitly discuss computer culture at all, passages like these defamiliarize the way data enable us to "collect information that we couldn't before, be it relationships revealed by phone calls or sentiments unveiled through tweets" (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013: 30). Considering the intimate details at the narrator's disposal, it is remarkable how distant (s)he remains from these characters. More data do not necessarily bring us closer to the real 'thing' or person: in fact, the narration of 2666 demonstrates that the opposite is the case.

In fact, we are not dealing with an omniscient narrator at all.⁸⁹ The narrator often has to resort to estimations, e.g.: "A . . . phone conversation . . . that Espinoza followed with odd enthusiasm, or feigned enthusiasm, or fondness, or at least civilized interest" (14) and "It's unclear whether Pelletier or Espinoza made the call" (64). The drive to precisely determine what has been said and thought culminates in its opposite: conjecture, an educated guess of 'what really happened'. This speculative narration results from a messy 'big data' approach to narration (which echoes Bolaño's 'Longinian' celebration of the monumental novel as forceful, yet technically imprecise).

I have argued in this section that the specific branch of sublime that pertains to the contemporary monumental novel cannot be framed within existing theories. This big data sublime shares with Locke's and Burke's sublime the effect of the bad infinite, of the book expanding within the covers. It also shares with the Kantian mathematical sublime an intrinsically open-ended act of apprehension (or 'counting'). It shares the Romantic emphasis on the fragmentary and digression as an infinite movement of *Sehnsucht*. However, it infinitely postpones a final moment of resolution or comprehension, as well as any relief in either reason or the 'passions'. By invoking this big data sublime, the monumental novel performs the current predicament of a discord between our ability to collect masses of data and our ability to digest them. As Mark Horowitz predicts, "the biggest challenge of the Petabyte Age won't be storing all

89 Especially in the "Part about the Critics," this mysterious narratorial instance seems to be a literary critic or historian (like the detective, a 'proto-reader') who reconstructs the endeavors of these characters from a perspective in the future. My interpretation is supported by the mention of a new generation of Archiboldi-scholars described as "rationalists, not in the philosophical sense but in the pejorative literal sense, denoting people less interested in literature than in literary criticism . . ." (72). We find similar critic-narrators in other works by Bolaño as well, such as *Distant Star* (orig. 1996) and in *The Savage Detectives* (orig. 1998).

that data, it'll be figuring out how to make sense of it" (Horowitz 2008: n.p.). Bolaño's novel reflects on these issues through its form, even when it does not explicitly refer to the digital.

So far, I have answered the first part of my research question for this chapter by categorizing the current sublime of data overload as a sublime-by-numbers. The question that arises on the basis of such an un-dissolvable sublime, is whether the database in fact brings us closer to an ordering of overload than narrative does. How does this current 'data sublime' affect the relation between narrative and database as competing ways of ordering the world, a relation that is a topic of debate in media studies? Does "The Part About the Crimes" in *2666*, which I argue is structured like a database, succeed in creating a sense of order and meaning in the chaos of Santa Teresa? And what does its success or failure tell us about the role of narrative and database when it comes to ordering information and commemorating persons and events?

2.3 "The Part About the Crimes" and the Breakdown of the Database

2.3.1 Overload and the database

Now that I have characterized the sublime aesthetics that pertains to the monumental novel in times of big data, this section addresses a challenge that is central to archival theory: how to organize all this information. This is by no means a contemporary problem. The history of information overload arrived with the introduction of the printing press which, during the late Renaissance, created a need to organize and categorize knowledge. As the title of a book by Ann Blair reflects, there was simply *Too Much to Know* (2010). Humanists, printers, and institutions sought ways to find, arrange, and make available a new abundance of particulars (11).⁹⁰ Today, we are once again in a situation that asks for new methods of processing information.

From the second half of the twentieth century, the digital database became the dominant medium for the organization of information. Above I have already indicated the importance of filters in data collection; the database is an entity that provides such a filter. Databases strip information

⁹⁰ Since the eighteenth century, there have been different approaches to this problem. Before the nineteenth century, the 'principle of pertinence' prevailed, according to which archives were arranged by content in terms of subject, not considering their provenance or original order. Then, in the early nineteenth century, a shift occurred: the organizational paradigm was the so-called 'principle of provenance,' according to which records of the same provenance should not be intermingled with records of other provenances. (See Veel 2011; Rosenberg 2003; Blair 2010)

of their context, so we can access any given record in multiple contexts at the same time. Consequently, they increase the number of possible combinations of data. Today, digital technology erodes established categories by enabling us to store objects, which were traditionally separated by media or form, as bits or a continuous stream of data (29). In this respect Friedrich Kittler has written of a *leveling effect* among different, utterly interconnected media. Digitization of information erases the difference between media, so that “[i]n computers everything becomes number: imageless, soundless, and wordless quantity” (1997: 32). This development makes information overload more than ever a pressing matter. In Victoria Vesna’s words, “[i]f we consider the invention of the printing press as the first wave of information overload, we can safely consider ourselves immersed in a second, tsunami wave” (2007: 28). Designed to order vast amounts of data, databases are meant to counter this overload, but they also contribute to it by breaking down established categories (Veel 308). The organization of data increasingly becomes a mutable, multi-linear process. As established above in the first chapter, the omnipresence of the database in media-culture has led in turn to the diminishing importance of narrative to make sense of the world.

As a result of the changes in accessing, processing, and communicating information outlined above, Van Alphen writes in *Staging the Archive* (2014) how

the symbolic form of (syntagmatic) narrativity has a more modest role to play. It is no longer the encompassing framework in which all kinds of information is embedded, but the other way around. It is in the encompassing framework of archival organizations that (small) narratives are embedded. (12)

My analysis of “The Part About the Crimes” will confirm this important cultural transformation. In particular, my case study will reveal that where narrative tries to accommodate the database, the precarious balance between the two modes of representation is prone to tipple over into the opposite situation: the database engulfing many fragmented narratives.

As part of this shift toward the quantitative, telling is increasingly conflated with counting in a mathematical sense. Earlier, I alluded to the link between narrating and counting, but I should say a bit more about this connection. Ernst points out the etymological affinity between words for ‘counting’ and ‘narrating’ in different languages: verbs like *conter*, *contar*, *raccontare*, *erzählen*, *vertellen*, and ‘to tell’ all testify to an outlook on the world that oscillates between narrative and statistics. Digital media that translate divergent information to ones and zeroes,

bring out this kinship between counting and narrating that has been there all along:

To tell, we learn, as a transitive verb, means not only “to give a live account in speech or writing of events or facts” (that is, to tell a story) but also “to count things” (to tell a *rosary*, for example). The very nature of digital operations and telling thus coincide. (Ernst 2013: 147-48)

Counting and narrating have in common that they put something in order. To count is to put numbers in their proper order and to narrate is to construe a narrative sequence of causal relations out of (seemingly insignificant) facts.⁹¹ When digital operations allow us to quantify “all sensual dimensions,” Ernst rejoices, “telling gets liberated from the narrative grip” (149). Ernst clearly wishes to move beyond story-telling as a primary way to process information. With *2666*’s “The Part About the Crimes,” I argue below for a more nuanced reflection on the relation between counting and telling. As I put forward, Bolaño’s writing reveals the limits and blind spots of both modes of ordering when it comes to an overload of data.

For now, we must keep in mind that this awareness of the quantitative aspect of storytelling did not originate with digital media, any more than ‘information overload’ did. There are earlier, nonliterary accounts of history that were the subject of Hayden White’s work on the subject of historiography. In “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality” (1980), White reminds us that narrative had not always been our primary model for making sense of the world and its history. In the early Middle Ages, annals were the dominant form of historiography and they organized events into a serial, sequential structure without the narrative component that ‘reveals’ the events as possessing a meaningful order (9). Annals consist of no more than a list of events, ‘told’ year by year: ‘telling’ here being the mathematical act of counting in discrete leaps. As Ernst quotes the historian François Furet:

quantitative history’s most general and elementary object is to form historical fact into a temporal series of homogeneous and comparable units, so that their evolution can be measured in terms of fixed intervals, usually years. (Furet qtd. in Ernst 2013: 150)

91 Along similar lines, Vilém Flusser argues that counting is our primary way of making sense of the world, and that writing is derived from this practice of ordering: “linear writing was invented . . . with the intention of counting. Counting is the act of tearing things out of their context, to arrange them in rows. Counting is the core of critical thinking” (2002: 42n).

In these non-narrative forms of history-writing, order can exist without the story-form: events derive their meaning from the fact of their inclusion in the record. Annals lack any sense of causality; they present “one thing after the other” and not “one thing because of the other” (152). In that respect, this older mode of representation is similar to current approaches to big data, which prefer correlation (the ‘what’) over causality (‘the why’).

Another important characteristic of quantitative forms of historiography that has currently found its way into the monumental novel is their inclusion of ‘non-entries,’ a kind of empty storage spaces that manifest themselves to the reader as gaps. These ‘non-events’ count for just as much as the ‘high points’ of human history. Annals reveal an understanding of history and human life as serial in character. The experience of time that underlies these presentations is non-hierarchical, since there is no author who decides what is of lesser and greater import. Instead, time is presented as paratactic⁹² and open-ended (White 1980: 12). Digital media’s affinity with these older modes of writing (besides the non-causality and ‘endlessness’ of both) lies in the fact that they convey a way of experiencing reality in discrete, rather than continuous, time (Ernst 2013a: 30). Under the influence of digital media, absences between the separate entries begin to count again.⁹³ The renewed focus on counting sparked by digitalization thus marks a return: in the digital era, we finally witness what Ernst calls the “reentry of narrative as calculation” (155).⁹⁴

I will now demonstrate how these cultural transformations resonate in “The Part About the Crimes,” which memorializes an episode in recent history that has not yet attained a sense of closure that would allow us to speak of it as ‘history’. This fourth book of 2666 hybridizes narrative and database, telling and counting, the causal and the serial. What does this shift mean for the novel’s potential to function as a textual monument?

92 Parataxis (Gr. *Paratassein*, to arrange side by side) is the juxtaposition of clauses or phrases without coordinating or subordinating conjunctions. For instance: ‘It was cold; it snowed’ or ‘hard winter; deficient in crops’.

93 In different ways, absence has always been an important part of media, Ernst reminds us: thus Gutenberg’s printing press made it possible to “literally calculate with empty spaces: in printing (as with typewriters and computer keyboards), even the empty key counts” (2013: 150).

94 Of course, “as calculation,” ‘telling’ would not be narrative at all. This return of telling-as-counting would rather mean the overcoming of narrative means of representation. Like Manovich, Ernst looks for alternatives to narrative in the digital age.

2.3.2 Losing (body-) count

“Book IV: The Part about the Crimes” gives a fictionalized account of a particularly brutal instance of recent events. Situated in the Mexican border town Santa Teresa in the desert of Sonora, this book is based on the mass killings of women in Ciudad Juárez in the 1990s.⁹⁵ In Santa Teresa, women are killed on a massive scale: “They disappear. They vanish into thin air, here one minute, gone the next. And after a while their bodies turn up in the desert” (287). My analysis of this part of *2666* will raise two main points. First, when narrative strives to encompass the database and the amount of data collected becomes too large, the database starts to engulf narrative, to become its environment. However, in book IV, it is not only narrative that is overflowing: we finally witness the breakdown of the ordering function of the database. Second, this breakdown has far-reaching ramifications for the idea of the novel as a monument. Rather than rendering the victims of the Santa Teresa (and, by analogy, Juárez) murders present, I will argue, Bolaño’s work results in an overwhelming effect of absence. This referential absence will, paradoxically, enable me to read the book as a radically inclusive monument.

To understand how this inclusiveness comes into effect, I begin by looking at the specific mode of frequency of the narrative. Frequency is Genette’s (1980) category for the relation between the number of times an event occurs in the story and the number of times it is mentioned in the text of the narrative. Bolaño has made the unusual choice of ‘telling’ each of the 110 of murder cases separately, in the anaphoric singulative mode. As I have explained earlier, the anaphoric singulative frequency narrates n times what happened n times (n being >1), so that each mention in the text corresponds to one occurrence in the story. Rather than operating from the syntagmatic logic that underlies narrativity, according to Manovich’s distinction, the anaphoric singulative mode brings narrative closer to the ‘paradigmatic’ ordering system of the database, where a whole range of possible choices is presented to the user. This obviously goes against the conventions of the crime genre, which typically tells in full detail a select number of cases in order to enable the reader’s emotional investment.⁹⁶ As an effect of this refusal to amalgamate on

95 During the writing process, Bolaño worked together closely with the journalist Sergio González Rodríguez, who investigated the ‘real’ killings for his book *Huesos en el desierto* (‘Bones in the Desert,’ 2002). González Rodríguez’s book includes a log-style account of the hundreds of women killed (“...23/09/02, Erika Pérez, 25 -30 years old, brown hair...28/08/02, Dora Alicia Martínez Mendoza, 34 years old, 35 stab wounds...”). The fourth book of *2666* draws extensively on the latter’s notes.

96 The film *Bordertown* (2006, dir. Gregory Nava) for instance, which is also based on the Ciudad Juárez femicides, has one of the victims escape and join forces with a female journalist (played by Jennifer Lopez) in order that the truth about the murders gets out to the public.

the author's part, the reader is bombarded with a veritable overload of dead bodies without symbolization or compression, to the point of desensitization.

This lack of affect is reinforced by the style in which the crimes are written: that of forensic reportage. Each of the corpses discovered over a period of five years is recorded in a separate entry. These case files meticulously and un sentimentally sum up time and date of the discovery, the conditions in which the body was found, name (if known), (estimated) age, clothes and hair color, cause of death, mutilated body parts, and the actions taken by the police.⁹⁷ These cases are accommodated in a list structure. Listing, or collecting, is not only a fundamental topic in mathematics, statistics, and computer science, but also the basic ordering principle of the database (Van Alphen 2014: 91). Bolaño's list of crimes is based on the conventional ordering of chronology. We can recognize this list on the basis of its formal features: the police reports are typographically delimited by a dot. Compared to the traditional plot structure, this presentation makes for a rather democratic treatment of information. There is no clear hierarchy in what is recorded since the list structure makes sure that no particular element stands out as more important than another. This equality is further reflected in the uniformity of style. Variations in length between the entries depend only on the amount of information available, and chronology is the only organizing principle of both the database itself and its individual entries.

This list, or basic database of victims has two functions: ordering and commemorating. I discuss the second function in the next section. In the present section, I focus on the database's attempts to create a sense of order in the unruly happenings in Santa Teresa. The police force, detectives, and other characters strive to derive meaning from this sequence of murder cases. Mere chronology does not suffice: they will need to impose categories upon the material. Selecting and ordering on the basis of a fixed set of categories, as Van Alphen writes, are basic archival activities (209). Categorization entails signification: the act of archiving begins with making distinctions (155). This means first noticing similarities within the dissimilar, then differences within the similar (see Foucault 1994). That is roughly how the police in *2666* go about their investigation, as they attempt to reveal underlying patterns in the mass

⁹⁷ Some of these police files also include a mention of the objects found with the body, usually personal belongings. These catalogues, though purely objective, add a more emotional angle to our reading of the report, since these details render the file more intimate and humanize the victim: "In her purse was a ticket for the nine a.m. bus to Tucson, a bus she would never catch. Also found were a lipstick, powder, Kleenex, a half-empty pack of cigarettes, and a package of condoms. There was no passport or appointment book or anything that might identify her. Nor was she carrying a lighter or matches" (355).

killings: “Beverly, unlike the previous March victims, had brown hair. Otherwise, there were some similarities: slight build, five foot four, long hair” (Bolaño 2008: 504).

These categorizations, however, fail to generate meaning. Time and again, the categories imposed on the cases turn out to be arbitrary. Even though multiple cases, for instance, concern young girls with long, dark hair, soon we learn that “that isn’t necessarily the mark of the killer. In Santa Teresa almost all the girls have long hair” (286). Each time, a new pattern emerges – successive victims who are pregnant, the detection of a black car with tinted windows, the fact that some corpses are dressed by their killers, or that many are found in a vacant dump, or that bodies were tied up with chords in the exact same knot. At one point, multiple victims are found with a nipple bitten off. The inspectors are certain that this must ‘mean’ something, since “[i]t would be too much of a coincidence if three bastards chose the same way to carve up their victims” (470-71). Each recurrent characteristic assures the police that they have identified the killer’s ‘signature’:

Let me explain: he began by raping and strangling, which is what you might call a normal way to kill. When he wasn’t caught, his murders became more personalized. The monster was unleashed. Now each crime bears his personal signature, said Inspector Ángel Fernández. (471)

But each time, new records are added to the list that do not meet the categories established on the basis of the preceding sequence. In this failure to categorize the crimes, the list does not reach any order.

The signifying failure of categorization is also due to the inherent open-endedness of the database, its inability to bring *closure* to the events. The (narrative) drive to comprehensively represent these crimes is frustrated from the beginning, because the beginning cannot clearly be demarcated. The first reported discovery of a corpse is dated 1993, but this date is immediately revealed as a construct. After a presentation of the specifics known about the first corpse, the narrator notes that

. . . it’s likely there had been other deaths before. The name of the first victim was Esperanza Gómez Saldaña and she was thirteen. Maybe for the sake of convenience, maybe because she was the first to be killed in 1993, she heads the list. Although surely there were other girls and women who died in 1992. Other girls and women who didn’t make it onto the list or were never found. (353)

Note how the narration is destabilized from the very beginning by the

substitution of 'surely' for 'likely' in this second statement. Like the "endless" city of Santa Teresa that seems to be "growing by the second" (129), "The Part about the Crimes" is boundlessly digressive, since the violence that is its subject is interminable.

Therefore, the end of the killings is proclaimed just as randomly as their commencement. Even though the murders continue unabatedly after one man has been captured, Santa Teresa's mayor performatively states in the media that

[t]he serial killings of women have been successfully resolved . . . Everything that happens from now on falls under the category of ordinary crimes, what you'd naturally find in a city in a constant state of growth and development. This is the end of the psychopaths. (539)

Over a hundred pages of new corpses follow after this 'successful' resolution, and the solution of the individual entries is equally left suspended. Ironically, most of these reports end with variations on the line "The case was closed." Yet most cases are only 'closed' on this level of the performative statement. The entries do not conclude, they merely terminate. Due to this inability to demarcate the parameters of the murders, the database cannot restore a sense of order. It only attests to the disorder of its subject.

Besides the impossibility to fix the temporal parameters of the murders, there is a lack of demarcation between the supposed serial killings and what in Santa Teresa seem 'everyday' occurrences of violence. Individual acts of violence, such as attacks on prostitutes or domestic abuse, continuously obscure 'the whole picture'. This causes a profound uncertainty as to which killings belong to the presumed serial killer's *oeuvre*. Each bureaucratic stamp of closure draws a circle around a particular case and thus puts the true meaning of the killings further out of reach. It is impossible to perceive the contours of the phenomenon since of course, 'what really happens' in Sonora is more encompassing and complex than the work of a single serial killer. Drug crimes, a capitalist system of gigantic factories where women are used as cheap laborers with no right to unionize, a sexist culture, extreme poverty, a corrupt police system... the list of factors goes on. One inspector sighs "I . . . examine everything with a magnifying glass, over and over, until I can't see straight" (470). He unwittingly points out the exact problem: he would do better to drop the magnifying glass and *zoom out*. These deaths could only 'make sense' relationally, understood in totality. But as an instance of a sublime of data overload, this totality is ungraspable, since the list of factors contributing to these crimes is simply *too big*. As a result, these murders are illegible: they can neither be written nor read.

Their lack of contours renders it impossible to make a narrative plot

out of these killings. This leaves only one option for their representation: 'telling' in its meaning of 'counting'. It is not that "telling gets liberated from the narrative grip" (2013: 149), as Ernst insists about operations of digital media. Rather, narrative simply fails as an ordering strategy since its structures cannot encapsulate the mass of data. Consequently, this literal body-count seems the only feasible alternative.

The archival listing of victims treats these bodies as data, ordered *by numbers*. The only way in which the database makes the discovery of the first body into a significant event, is because, from this point on, "the killings of women began to be counted" (353). Like the medieval annals, Bolaño's list organizes events into a serial, sequential order, re-counted in discrete leaps of homogeneous units. These measured units provide a development in terms of fixed intervals. Absences between the separate entries therefore count as well as presences, for instance in the months in which no bodies are discovered. By contrast, within the syntagmatic ordering of narrative, these months would simply be skipped. In "The Part About Crime," by contrast, the count continues:

•
There were no deaths in July. None in August either. (375)
•

In Bolaño's database of the crimes, as in the historiographical genre of the annals, 'non-events' count just as much as the high points of history. This is not only a nudge to a pre-narrative past, but also to digital computing in which semantic *vacui* count as value. Together with the clinical tone of forensic investigation, these discrete and finite records serve to create a sense of objectivity.

This 'mathematical' approach to representation, however, does not result in greater objectivity. From the very first entry onwards, the calculation of victims is an approximation. As cited above, the first record notes that a complete count of the femicides cannot be accomplished. The first corpse recorded in the database is simply the first one to be counted and the narrator stresses that there have most likely been previous deaths. By emphasizing the uncountability of the victims, the database foregrounds the gap between its calculations and 'what really happened,' which at all times remains unknowable.

Objectivity is further compromised by the inconclusive determinations of the dates of death. Instead of referring to an exact day, the records often emphasize the inability to calculate one: "[t]he date of death was fixed, in a general way, between January 1 and January 6, 1994, although there was some possibility that the body had been dumped in the desert on December 25 or 26 of the previous year, now fortunately past" (400). The determination of the victim's age is marked by a similar uncertainty: "[a]ccording to the medical examiner, the woman was probably between

eighteen and twenty-two, although she might well have been between sixteen and twenty-three" (462). The approximations of forensics fail to resolve the multiple possibilities of 'what really happened'.

To compensate for these many undecidable factors, gaps in the database representation are filled in by narrative interjections. These narrative 'fillings' present conjectures and speculations regarding what could have happened.

Maybe she was going to the United States to join her husband or her lover, the father of the child she was expecting, some poor fuck who lived there illegally and maybe never knew he had gotten this woman pregnant or that she, when she found out, would come looking for him. (359)

Here, gaps between the discrete, 'counted' entries in the series are filled with micro-narrative information. Such narrative fragments are added in a failed attempt to answer the question 'why?', where the forensic data is restricted to (an incomplete representation of) the 'what?' of the crimes.

On a larger level, there are several longer, disparate narrative threads in "The Part About the Crimes," that are revisited throughout the entries in the database. These secondary threads focus on characters, who, each in their own way, investigate these crimes: detectives, policemen, journalists, vigilantes, and the aforementioned ageing psychic on local television. The following entry offers an example of this oscillation between narrative and statistics, or forensic observation:

Three days after the discovery of Luisa Cardona's body, the body of another woman was found in the same Podestá ravine. The patrolmen Santiago Ordóñez and Olegario Cura found the body. What were Ordóñez and Cura doing there? Taking a look around, as Ordóñez admitted. Later he said they were there because Cura had insisted on going. ... For a while, according to Ordóñez, Lalo Cura did strange things, like measuring the ground and the height of the walls, looking up toward the top of the ravine and measuring the arc that Laura Cardona's body must have traced as it fell. After a while, when Ordóñez was getting bored, Lalo Cura told him that the killer or killers had disposed of the body in that particular spot so it would be found as soon as possible. When Ordóñez objected that there weren't exactly many people around, Lalo Cura pointed to the edge of the ravine. Ordóñez looked up and saw three

children, or maybe an adolescent and two children, all wearing shorts, who were watching them closely. ... A little while later, with Lalo out of sight, he heard a whistle and headed after his partner. When he reached him he saw a woman's body lying at his feet ... The dead woman was five foot seven and she had long black hair. She didn't have any kind of identification on her. No one claimed the body. The case was soon closed. (525-26)

Although it begins in the clinical tone that is characteristic of "The Part About the Crimes," the entry soon gives way to a more narrative description. A young policeman named Olegario ('Lalo') Cura becomes obsessed by the murders. It is a recurring storyline and we recognize its narrative character by its presentation of causal relations between events: e.g. "they were there *because* ..."; "the killers had disposed of the body in that particular spot *so* ...". Furthermore, the events are centered on characters who are subjected to development. For a start, we witness how Lalo Cura gradually becomes entangled in the investigation and how his behavior becomes progressively stranger in the eyes of his partner. Also, their motivations are given to the reader: e.g. Lalo Cura presents a hypothesis to appease Ordóñez, who is getting bored. The entry then returns to the typical dispassionate tone of the forensic specialists on the scene, as they empirically measure the body. At this point, the narrative elements identified above dissolve to make place for a sequence of *paratactic* phrases, a juxtaposition of clauses without the establishment of relations between them: "The dead woman was five foot seven and she had long black hair. She didn't have any kind of identification on her. No one claimed the body. The case was soon closed." Narrative and database alternate in this fashion throughout the fourth book, and since neither reaches a satisfying solution, they mutually reveal each other's gaps and limited nature. Here, the monumental novel and the human subject it portrays are in the same situation: suspended between the 'narrative' wish for motivations and causality and the database's embodiment of an illegible number of entries which can be combined and recombined almost endlessly.

Both 'telling' and 'counting' fail to perform the monumental task of comprehending the femicides, because their engulfing scope far surpasses any human perspective. Where a monumental novel like 2666 incorporates the ordering principles of the database, the balance between these two modes of presentation tips over when there is too much data. In "The Part About the Crimes," I have argued, database structures contain the dispersed fragments of narrative. In this respect, it is significant that 2666 has been called Bolaño's *Moby-Dick* (see Wimmer 2011). There is, however, an important difference between the two. Melville's masterwork famously includes epic lists, for instance

the 'cetology' catalogue of types of whales in chapter 32. These lists are embedded within the encompassing framework of the narrative. In Bolaño's "Part about the Crimes" it is exactly the other way around: the many fragmented narratives are framed by the list. This reversal is typical of the current shift to the archival in media, as Van Alphen has noted (2014: 12). Narrative is absorbed by the database structure, which becomes its environment.

This engulfing nature of the database, in the final instance, is the most important cause for the failure of the list structure to 'solve' these murders. Both the characters as investigators of the femicides, and the reader who repeats these characters' hermeneutic activities, are *enveloped* by these database structures. It is not merely impossible to comprehend (in Kant's quite literal meaning of *Umfassen*, to wrap our minds around) the data of these crimes: they encircle *us*. As a result, everyone in the novel is implicated in the crimes, there is no distant position from which these can be objectively perceived. The sublime of overload occurs when the ordering system of the database breaks down, leaving us once again without an adequate frame of perception of these overwhelming events.

This breakdown of the database in *2666* contains an important corrective to overly triumphant accounts of the displacement of narrative by quantitative modes of representation. Media theorists who present the shift from narrative to database and counting as a liberating development argue that databases will "displace narrative, . . . infect and deconstruct narrative endlessly, to make it retreat behind the database or dissolve back into it, to become finally its own sprawling genre" (Folsom 2007: 1577) and that "telling gets liberated from the narrative grip" (Ernst 2013: 149). After close examination of the specific mode of presentation of the crimes in *2666*, we realize that the fragmentation of narrative is not an occasion for celebration; that narrative is not something we move 'beyond'. Instead, we reach the limits of understanding due to the scope and lack of contours of the object presented. Counting and listing are the only options left, but these alternative structures, too, fall short of ordering the crimes. Like the typical big dataset, the information in the police files is "a miscellany of facts and measurements, collected for no scientific purpose, using an ad hoc procedure. It is riddled with errors, and marred by numerous, frustrating gaps: missing pieces of information that any reasonable scientist would want to know" (Aiden and Michel 2013: 42).

Where the database is overflowed, where its ordering function fails, the sublime occurs. Even though this part of the novel is clearly a hybrid between the organizing principles of narrative and database, it would therefore be misleading to speak of a database aesthetic, because it is the failure of the database that causes the powerful effect of the presentation. Unlike in data visualizations which, according to Manovich, are characterized by distance, overview and harmony, and therefore 'anti-

sublime' (2002), in "The Part About the Crimes" we find an aesthetics of the sublime of big data where the database breaks down as an ordering system. As I will argue in the next section, this has far-reaching consequences when it comes to novel's potential to memorialize the victims of these crimes.

2.4 An Inclusive Monumentality?

2.4.1 The database as a memorial

No six million Jews were murdered, but only one Jew, and this happened six million times. If you really want to understand the meaning of the persecution of the Jews, you would have to write six million biographies of six million individuals.

– Abel J. Herzberg⁹⁸

If the database of the crimes fails in its ordering function, we must still address the other function I assigned to the list: commemoration. The failure of the database to categorize and to create an order that I have determined in the last section, also entails an ethical failure that I need to examine more closely. In order to analyze the database as a monument, we must expand our focus to momentarily consider the real geographical space to which Santa Teresa refers. Specifically, I address the marginal status of the victims of the femicides in Ciudad Juárez, in order to provide a basis to raise the question of the novel's workings as a monument – or better, a memorial.

It is important to note that most of these victims were underpaid female workers of Mexico's many *maquiladoras*, factories of international companies that outsource labor.⁹⁹ The circumstances of labor in these factories are notoriously dire. Sebastian Ferrari (2012) argues that the *maquiladora* workers are subjected to a double erasure: first a *political* erasure in neoliberal capitalism during their lifetime, then a *physical* erasure through their deaths (114). Even during their lives, the victims

98 *Between Two Streams: A Diary from Bergen-Belsen*, trans. Jack Santcross, 1997 [1950]. Qtd. on <<http://www.auschwitz.nl/en-holocaust>>

99 *Maquiladoras* are gigantic factories owned by companies from the United States and Europe. The factories import materials, assemble the products, and then export the finished products to the US or Europe, without being subject to tariffs or restrictions on the movement of commodities. Moreover, often they are exempt from labor union requirements. They are excluded from having to pay local taxes, and not bound by the law to acknowledge the legal representation of workers by unions. They mostly hire female workers who are less likely to complain about the deprivation of work protections. (Ferrari 2012: 115).

did not count. As a node within these larger structures of global neoliberalism, as 2666's detective Kessler rightfully intuits, "everyone living in that city is outside of society" (267). In Santa Teresa there is no center, there are only margins and the female workers who fall prey to the killings are the most marginalized of all.

This fictionalized rendition reflects the real situation in Mexico rather truthfully. Melissa Wright argues in *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism* (2006) that the young women who enter the border zone as industrial laborers are already treated as 'disposable' during their lives by the industries that employ them. According to this 'myth of disposability,' as she phrases it, "the Mexican woman personifies waste-in-the-making, as the material of her body gains shape through discourses that explain how she is untrainable, un-skilled, and always a temporary worker" (73). The concept of disposability allows Wright to note a parallel between the maquiladora worker's turnover and her disposal in murder, both forming a

crafting of the Mexican woman as a figure whose value can be extracted from her, whether it be in the form of her virtue, her organs, or her efficiency on the production floor. And once 'they,' her murderers or her supervisors, 'get what they want from' her, she is discarded. (87)

In 2666 this disposable status of the victims is an important recurring element in the presentation of their files. It is symbolically underlined by the locale of the bodies, which are often found near sewer pipes and on garbage dumps. Moreover, the women's regions of origin often remain unclear. No one seems to be born in Santa Teresa, it is "[a]s if the girl had come to Santa Teresa and lived there invisibly until the murderer or murderers took notice of her and killed her" (Bolaño 2008: 467). The victims are decontextualized, the links to their places of origin erased. Their bodies are carelessly done away with by their killers, then, after their discovery by the police, they are "tossed into the public grave" (575). In many cases the maquiladoras do not even keep a database of their workers. Furthermore, these women often did not have papers of identification. Moreover, the investigation of the 'real' *feminicidios* in Juárez has been notoriously questionable and obstructed by corruption and sloppy detective work, and a large number of files has been conveniently lost (See González Rodríguez 2002).¹⁰⁰

Because of the marginalized status of the female workers, characterized by erasure and disposability, they would have fallen prey

100 In the "Part About the Crimes," the lost document (e.g. filing errors and the disappearance of ballistic analyses, police files, employee files of maquiladoras, blood samples, semen samples) is a recurrent trope.

to forgetfulness were they not represented after their deaths. Without reminders in literature and other arts and media, it would not be far-fetched to allege that these victims would sooner or later be dropped in what Bolaño terms the “garbage pit of history” (228). This begs the question if this monumental novel indeed functions as a monument, or, more accurately, a memorial to the victims of the Juárez femicides.

In the first chapter of this dissertation I have defined the monument, with Assmann (1991) and Van Maas (2012), as a deliberate physical marker designed to outlive the present and reach an unknown future recipient to communicate a presence. According to this definition, writing has the power to preserve by transcending time and space. As we know, the memorial operates along the same principles, with the difference that it does not celebrate heroes and public events, but commemorates victims of the past, and functions as an exhortation to remember and not repeat past tragedies. What happens to this notion of the text as a memorial when the novel incorporates the structures of the database to commemorate over a hundred faceless victims? Does the text render them present, in act of testimony to future readers? Does *2666* strive to account for these bodies, which did not even count during their lives, by making them part of an order, an aesthetic structure? And how does the concept of the sublime help to elucidate this particular mode of commemoration? These are the questions I am left with at this point of the analysis, and I will now proceed to answer them.

The data available on each of the victims in the database is severely limited and numerous gaps pervade the accounts. Still, or arguably because of the finite nature of the separate entries, the meticulous description of the remains of the victims in one such entry transmits a (very minimal sense) of ‘presence’. This minimal presence is constituted by a characteristic of data that distinguishes it from the more general category of ‘information,’ namely data’s discreteness: each datum is individual, separate, and separable.

But data is also aggregative: it has a way of piling up (Gitelman and Jackson 2013: 8). Individual, homologous data entries are collected and accumulated into sets. When we read these files in sequence as we are meant to, they lose their completeness. In the case of *2666*, the victims exist not for themselves, only in relation to the series of data that precedes and follows. This, as Van Alphen writes, “is one of the paradoxical effects of archiving: at a certain point the individual components are deemed to be only another expression of those objects that surround it” (21). In the archival act, singularity is erased. This is especially the case when human beings are ‘collected.’ We then witness the transformation from subject to stored object. There are plenty of examples from history to remind us of the horrific effects that such a transformation can have when used for

political ends.¹⁰¹ Matthias Winzer in this respect writes of the *violence* inherent in all archiving activities (1998: 24). Vesna, too, points out this prevalent problem in designing database systems: “[h]ow does one represent the information without dehumanizing it?” (2008a: x-xi). This question is posed especially forcefully by Bolaño’s novel, considering the fact that the bodies in the database are dismembered. Where narrative is tied to unity, life, and meaning, the database is here used to present the inhuman: the fragmentary body of the depersonalized human being.

This problem of preserving the humanity and singular presence of the deceased becomes progressively more poignant as the length of the list increases. The sheer quantity of bodies starts to interfere with the attempt to preserve them, to endow them with presence. As more cases are added to the list of victims, the last becomes ever more indistinguishable from the preceding ones. A tension is brought to work between the repetitiveness of the serial list structure and the singular variations presented within each entry. In trying to keep track of the grisly body count, we experience what Van Alphen calls the “mass-induced dissolution of referentiality” (103) of the archive. Through repetition, the representation effaces its referent. The political and material erasure of these women that Ferrari signaled is now followed by a third stage of archival erasure. The female victims soon become interchangeable, and their singularity is annihilated even within the commemoration of their senseless deaths.

This annihilation is performed by the most forceful aesthetic component of Bolaño’s monumental text: its rhythm. In the enumeration of the crimes, rhythm is created by the repetition of inconclusive sentences like “the case was left unresolved” and “no one came to claim the body,” and reoccurring characteristics like “she had long black hair” or “the victim was anally and vaginally raped”. The details of the separate entries begin to blur. The effect is more poetic than narrative and the relentless flow of data is almost hypnotizing. The plot of the novel at times dissolves completely and leaves the reader with a myriad of ungraspable patterns flashing before her eyes, disappearing as soon as they emerge. In spite of the horrors of the reports’ contents, all affect is soon emptied out from the representation. The reader even loses what she thought were minimal markers of meaning. As the data pours over her eyes at a fast pace, the experience overrides

101 Van Alphen (2014) explains how administration can serve genocide. Political regimes, he writes, transform their prospective victims into archival records (numbers, lists and categories) so that henceforth they are no longer dealing with fellow human beings, but rather with abstract figures. The subsequent decision to execute these people would then concern administrative records, which obviously makes the task at hand easier: “[a]n archival organization of genocide is almost a precondition for genocide, because it depletes human subjectivity before the actual killing takes place” (216).

normal perception. The result is the experience of the sublime as an overload without transcendence. The sublime occurs when we cannot perceive the contours of a phenomenon, and this creates a dizzying, hypnotic effect. Numbness is caused by a defense mechanism, the blocking of the sensory stimuli or cognitive input of all these horrific descriptions of mangled bodies. "When you see a gruesome picture over and over again," Andy Warhol has demonstrated in his *Disaster* series, "it doesn't really have any effect" (qtd. in Lippard 1966: 98).

Because of this mass-induced dissolution of singularity, the listing of individual names fails to make its subject referentially present. It cannot transcend the absence of these victims as a memorial would. But this does not mean that "The Part About the Crimes" is a failed memorial altogether. For exactly by failing to order these crimes, Bolaño's text manages to evoke an overwhelming sense of *absence*. It is the same powerful effect of absence that emanates from certain monuments after World War I (see Jay 1995), or many of the Holocaust memorials that have been modeled as lists of names, and Washington D.C.'s Vietnam memorial in 1982 (Van Alphen 2014: 103). In these cases, it is the uncountable number of victims that overwhelms us, that cannot be imagined and thus occasions a sublime experience. This sublimity of lists justifies Bolaño's choice to represent these crimes in the form of a database: the economy of narrative compression would fall short of commemorating the victims of such a grand scale of atrocities.¹⁰² Just as Homer conveyed the disastrous effects of the Trojan war by enumerating them in a paratactic list of warships in the *Iliad* (2.494–759), Bolaño quantifies the enormity of the horrors reigning in Santa Teresa by enumerating the victims in a paratactic list of case files. Only the *monumental* can do justice to these monstrosities.

Where the list fails at attaining a resolution in denoting the specific victims it referentially points to, it succeeds as an aesthetic strategy to convey the monumental scale of the absence of its subject. The list then takes on a symbolic load, transforms into a memorial for something far surpassing the uncountable number of victims included in the book. Because of globalization and mass consumption, we are all implicated in these murders, and no one stands outside the horrors depicted. *2666*, as a textual monument, becomes massively inclusive. In Marcela Valdes' words, Bolaño wrote "a postmortem for the dead of the past, the present and the future" (2009: 15).

102 Another recent example of such a monument that does not make a selection of data is the 'Jewish Digital Monument,' an archive with information on all the Jews who were deported during World War II in the Netherlands. Here metonymical strategies, of one or a few individuals representing the memory of a larger group, are completely absent. As a result, the 'pixelated' representation of the data has an overpowering effect. <<http://www.joodsmonument.nl>>

This inclusivity, however, comes with monumental responsibilities, as I will now argue in the last subsection of this chapter.

2.4.2 Global implications

All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz

– Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*¹⁰³

Not only can the monumental scope of Bolaño's novel be said to memorialize a number of people that surpasses the number of victims referred to in the book: *2666*'s inclusive monumentality also suggests global complicity in the events in Santa Teresa. In this last subsection I argue that this novel constructs far-reaching networks of influence that envelop the author and his readers. The enormous scope of this database of crimes is to an important extent caused by expanding frames of connection in our age of late globalization. These larger, socio-economic structures in Santa Teresa envelop the characters themselves. Therefore, they are beyond their interpolative range. American master-detective Albert Kessler, for instance, proclaims that "the best thing would be for every last one of the people there [in Santa Teresa] to head out into the desert some night and cross the border" (267). His assessment reveals his ignorance as to the scope of the events in Mexico. These events do not begin and end in that country: they are inextricably connected to both Europe and the United States, who benefit from the dire situation in Santa Teresa by way of the maquiladoras of their companies. In this sense, the real-life Juárez in the state of Chihuahua, and by extension Bolaño's fictional Sonoran border town, forms a niche where different parts of the world come together. Each book or 'part' of *2666* features characters from Europe (the critics, Archimboldi) and the US (Kessler, Haas, Fate) who come to Santa Teresa. These parts are all connected but their links are not given, there are gaps between them. The border town and its maquiladoras thus function quite literally as a vanishing point where all these places come together only in order for their connection to be conveniently erased. By interpreting the killings as a local problem, the police disconnect the murders from the node of social, political, and economic links of neoliberalism.

2666 offers meta-fictional reflections on this issue of erasure through a comparison between the 'major author' and the serial killer/computer programmer. In Book V, a self-proclaimed "ex-writer" expresses his view that all 'minor' works of literature are dictated by the masterpiece. These minor works mimic the masterpiece's design and conceal it from

103 (1990: 45)

our view: “[t]here must be many books, many lovely pines, to shield from hungry eyes the book that really matters, the wretched cave of our misfortune, the magic flower of winter!” Every book that is less than a masterpiece is thus no more than camouflage, or “cannon fodder, a slogging foot soldier, a piece to be sacrificed” (786). Much as in Borges’s *Babel*, the total production of books is here imagined as an excess. In such a jumble of insignificant books, identifying true literary genius becomes as difficult as catching a single killer in a border-town that is constantly expanding, and where violence and murder are daily occurrences.

The serial killer is as much a fiction in *2666* as is the monumental author. It is highly unlikely that the enormous number of murders listed in “The Part About the Crimes” would have been committed by one individual. Still, despite the uncountable number of victims, the police and media mythologize these crimes by posing the existence of such an individual: “according to the legend, there’s just one killer and he’ll never be caught” (287). When crimes are committed that do not match the ‘signature’ of this killer, their perpetrators are thought of as ‘copy-cats,’ paralleling minor writers who mimic the unique design of the genius. This hypothesis of one murderer becomes even more spurious when, after the arrest of the giant German Klaus Haas, the killings continue unabatedly. As Archimboldi’s nephew, Haas has similar gigantic features (tall and thin with bones “made of steel,” yellow hair, and bright blue eyes “like a hawk’s,” 474; 488). These characteristics cast him as the perfect candidate for the part of superhuman monster, which makes him attractive to the media. Of course, the larger the number of victims grows, the more legendary and monstrous the presumed killer becomes. The sensationalism in the idea of “the biggest serial killings in history” (294), like that of “the fattest novel in the world,” is obviously more appealing than the complex truth of global injustice.

The serial killer thus blocks from our view, and distracts us from, our implication in these global injustices. As Ferrari suggests, this lack of an ‘outside’ to the killings could very well have informed Bolaño’s choice of naming the different chapters ‘parts,’ as in “La parte de dos crímenes” or “La parte de Amalfitano”.¹⁰⁴ ‘Part,’ he suggests, stands for role, implying that the characters are agents contributing to the events in *Santa Teresa* (2012: 124). From the European literary critics to the Chilean philosophy professor, from the African-American journalist to the self-mutilating pop artist, from policeman to war hero, everyone takes part in the global structures that envelop and enable these crimes. Thus, everyone stands in the way and blocks ‘the killer’ from sight. This occlusion is expressed in the ‘lovely pines’ of insignificant novels that, according to Bolaño’s ex-writer, shelter the masterpiece from

104 This meaning does not resonate in Natasha Wimmer’s translation of the chapters, since she chose the more unequivocal “The Part About...” instead of “The Part of...”.

view in the “forest of literature.”¹⁰⁵ Both ‘serial killer’ and ‘major author’ are extrapolations from the overwhelming flow of data available. In reality, like the ‘major writer,’ the serial killer in *2666* is “all men.” The monumental hides the collective that kills and writes, indeed it is this collective. The masses create the massive. This global network of responsibility includes the author and readers of *2666: everyone writes the oeuvre of the killer*. *2666* thus posits that all acts of monumentalization are acts of binding in the face of overload, when synthesis is in fact impossible to attain. Thus heroes and villains, the terrible and the monstrous, major writers and serial killers are assigned their roles and then blown up out of all proportions. We need the big and the terrible in order to hide behind it; that is why we make monsters of our authors and our killers alike.

This insight is universally applicable but obtains an added sense of urgency with the culture of datafication. As Vesna writes, today we are confronted with the “importance of every particle and wave, of the interconnectivity of all of us, and everything surrounding us,” which also means that “ownership of [data] is only an illusion of the mind, and so it is with all data that we collect, store, manipulate, and use in our lifetimes” (2007: 35). This interconnectivity has implications for Bolaño’s authorship of a novel that deals with events of a global scope. Bolaño indeed gestures in the direction of such a disavowal of ownership: he cannot be the solitary genius at the origin of this novel, since he could not have written it without the enormity of the Ciudad Juárez crimes. In our global, late-capitalist society, we are all connected to these events indirectly. Thus Bolaño, by way of his monumental strategies of excess and overload, dismantles the illusion of the signature or the proper name, of the solitary author as the originary locus of creation. Again, we are pointed in the direction of a shared, inclusive monumentality: not only is this novel a monument for everyone, it is a monument *by* everyone.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have demonstrated how in Bolaño’s monumental novel, interminable narrativity creates the impression that the book continues beyond its covers. In this reading experience, the sublime becomes a performative and quantitative effect. Recounting, we have seen, was reduced to a mode of counting the many sequentially presented fragments. Through this experience of data overload as a sublime-by-numbers with no resolve or happy ending, *2666* stages a situation that we

105 This metaphor reflects a Romantic notion of the ‘book-as-world’ that is coming closer now that Google has set out to digitize ‘all books in the world’.

are familiar with in the information age: of being encompassed by data. This enactment of data sublime poses hermeneutic challenges concerning attention and the identification of patterns of meaning. I have argued that this sublime operates from a logic that opposes monumentality, when we understand the latter in its canonical sense as rendering artists and artefacts larger than life. This kind of monumentality is an answer to the unease that the sublime evokes.

As my analysis of “The Part About the Crimes” as a hybrid form between narrative and database exemplified, the monumental novel is suspended between the ‘narrative’ wish for motivations and causality, and the database’s embodiment of an illegible number of entries which can be combined in continuously new ways. Yet, this database cannot lend a meaningful order to Bolaño’s unruly story-world. Both the characters as investigators of the femicides and the reader who repeats these characters’ hermeneutic activities were themselves enveloped by its structures.

I have established two important consequences to this hermeneutic breakdown for the scope of the monumental novel. First, as a database structure, the novel’s character as a memorial that lists victims of the femicides fails to make its subject referentially present. At the same time, it succeeds insofar as it takes on a symbolic charge by evoking an overwhelming sense of absence. Thus, a more inclusive memorial effect in the novel is brought about by way of the ‘uncountability’ of the sublime. Second, this inclusivity, we have seen, also implies new responsibilities. As these local crimes come about by way of complex global networks of influence, *2666* hints at a collective complicity. Participation in a global, late-capitalist economy involves even the seemingly innocent and detached literary critics in these horrors. By connecting the other four parts of his magnum opus to Santa Teresa, Bolaño implies a global, collective ‘authorship’ and network of responsibility. The monumental binds a sublime excess of data

In an age of big data and globalization, Nietzsche’s warning against the disregard of the principle of historical causality in *Untimely Meditations* obtains a new urgency. As discussed, Nietzsche stated that an erasure of causal relations creates the illusion of transcendent and timeless greatness, thus repeating not only the ‘high points’ of history but also its horrors. This point is of especial import in a time when we have more decontextualized units of information at our disposal than ever before. We might be more aware than ever of connectivity, yet at the same time, it has become harder to divine causal relations. The links that bind people in different parts of the world are so encompassing and complex as to be obscured. As if this situation were not challenging enough in itself, big data enthusiasts prompt “society ... to shed some of its obsession for causality in exchange for simple correlations: not knowing why but only what” (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013).

This situation, 2666 cautions, can easily result in a neoromantic experience marked by fragmentation and *Sehnsucht*. The fact that 2666's giant serial killer Klaus Haas is a computer programmer by profession underscores this argument. Whereas Archimboldi as the Romantic genius was the only hope of restoring a lost unity to his world through art, in our fragmented data-society only the computer programmer, the one who creates the algorithms, can create programs that show us some of the connections. The Kantian genius is the fiction of the 'major author,' who is directly informed by nature to transmit the rules of art, for his epigones to follow (Kant 2008, §181: 178–9). In a data society, Bolaño implicitly suggests through the character Klaus Haas, this genius is replaced by the computer which sets out the rules of the game.

In the end, only the monument(al) survives. 2666 thematizes how the erasure of causal relations increases the superhuman power attributed to the individual, rendering him even more monstrous since we see his works as "effects in themselves" [*Wirkung ohne Ursache*] (Nietzsche 1997: 70-1). We ignore the historical causes that led to the monumental in the first place. Thus we create artistic monsters, like Bolaño creates Archimboldi, like Santa Teresa creates Haas, like we 'create' Bolaño, and then we try to enforce the fantasy that each acted autonomously. 2666 reveals the process by which, as Rehding has put it, "the genius is *made* to make history" (2009: 42).

My analysis of Bolaño's novel has offered insight in how data overload can easily lead to a consolidation of the monumental in order to assert longevity. The monumental and the ephemeral enter into a dialectic relation. This dialectic between the fragmentary and the permanent is also central to the work of the author I focus on in the next chapter. Against his own urge to shut out the present, we will see that his writing, like Bolaño's, closely entangles with new media. But where 2666 dealt with events from (recent) world history, Knausgård immortalizes the everyday and the self through writing.

Chapter three

Monumentalizing the Everyday: Knausgård's *My Struggle*, Archival Obsessions, and the Quantified Self

. . . what I wanted with this, well, away from the minimalist, off to the maximalist, the elaborate and expansive, the baroque, Moby-Dick, but not in an epic sense, I had tried to expand the small novel, that only deals with one person, where no big external actions take place, but everything is about internal shifts, to an epic scale, do you see what I mean?

—Knausgård, *My Struggle*, Book Five¹⁰⁶

In Dave Eggers's novel *The Circle* (2013), about a powerful social media corporation (reminiscent of Facebook or Google) that wants to make the world a better place by recording everything, one of the leaders makes a speech that echoes the rhetoric of big data enthusiasts:

There needs to be accountability. Tyrants can no longer hide. There needs to be, and will be, documentation and accountability, and we need to bear witness. And to this end, I insist that all that happens should be known. The words dropped onto the screen: ALL THAT HAPPENS SHOULD BE KNOWN. (67)

Eggers is not far off the mark in emulating the rhetoric of big data theorists like Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier. In *Big Data: A revolution That Will Transform How We Live, Work, and Think* (2013), they predict that

106 (2014a: 608). At the present time, the fourth, fifth, and sixth book of the *My Struggle* series have not yet been published in English translation. Translations of citations from these books are mine.

as big data techniques are systematically integrated into daily life, society will strive to understand the world from a larger, more comprehensive perspective than ever before. We will adapt “a sort of N=all of the mind,” a “compulsion to get everything, to see everything from every possible angle” (49).

This ‘N=all’ approach of mapping and charting ‘everything’ affects the ways in which we use media to represent ourselves and create, store, and transmit memories. As José van Dijck remarks, “[d]igitization is surreptitiously shaping our acts of cultural memory – the way we record, save and retrieve remembrances of our lives past” (2004: 349-73). This transformation also comes to the fore in the strategies of representation in autobiographical writing. The present chapter probes deeper into the consequences of these developments of big data, datafication, and quantification. It investigates how (a) they inspire current trends in self-representation in new media and social networking sites and (b) how these practices in turn influence representations of the self and the everyday in the autobiographical novel. Under the influence of big data and an aesthetics of quantification and seriality in new media practices, I argue, the scope of the autobiographical novel becomes more encompassing. I will construe this argument on the basis of an analysis of Karl Ove Knausgård’s autobiographical series *My Struggle* (*Min Kamp*, 2009-11).

‘Knausgård purposely sets out to write a monumental work’. That is how this series of six autobiographical novels,¹⁰⁷ which amount to 3600 pages, can be neatly summed up. Throughout his work, the Norwegian author repeatedly expresses his aspiration to leave behind a masterpiece to secure his immortality: “I would show the whole damn world who I was and what I was made of, goddamnit. I would crush them all one by one” (2013a: 405). Outbursts like these, coupled with the scope of his project, put the author on a par with Bolaño’s ‘bigger is better’ rhetoric and the ‘shock and awe’ of the Longinian sublime. Against the short-lived and the fashionable, Knausgård craves the monumental for its duration and size, and dreams of a legacy worthy of Dostoevsky and Proust.

But there is one problem: the small and disposable that he so despises continuously gets in the way of writing: “Why choose the small if the big exists? I hated the small, and wasn’t very good at it, I had to admit”

107 Volume 1, *A Death in the Family. My Struggle: 1* (original: *Min Kamp. Første bok*) was published in 2009 in Norwegian, and the translation was published in 2012. Volume 2, *A Man in Love. My Struggle: 2* (*Min Kamp. Andre bok*) was published in 2009; the translation in 2013. Volume 3, *Boyhood Island. My Struggle: 3* (*Min Kamp Tredje bok*) was published in 2009; the translation in 2014. Volume 4, *Min Kamp. Fjerde bok* was published in 2010 and has yet to appear in English translation. The same applies to volume 5 (*Femte bok*, 2010) and 6 (*Sjette bok*, 2011).

(446). Daily life, the episodic, and the fragmentary keep interfering with the 'grand narrative' he seeks to construct for himself. How to reach monumental heights when you are stuck in a small and unheroic life—taking care of your children, changing diapers, arguing with your wife, unable to get anything on paper?

Finally, he decides to chronicle these small episodes instead. He starts to frantically record his daily struggles, writing "like a madman ... totally manic" (2013: 305). Knausgård tells his wife he must leave her at home to care alone for their recently born daughter, because he *must write*. Even when she threatens to leave him and take the child with her, he does not abandon his pursuit. Instead of polished and beautiful prose, a high-speed style of chronicling takes over. The author reports on the process of writing *itself*, one page at a time. He has poured his writing out on the page in extremely long sittings and published all volumes, except the first, without editing or even reading back what he had written.

How should we understand this graphomaniac urge to record the minutiae of daily life? Knausgård himself suggests that his writing brings him 'closer' to reality:

I had to cut all my ties with the flattering, thoroughly corrupt world of culture in which everyone, every single little upstart, was for sale, cut all my ties with the vacuous TV and newspaper world, sit down in a room and read in earnest, not contemporary literature but literature of the highest quality, and then write as if my life depended on it. (2013: 459)

The author thus presents his project as a way of turning away from the present world marked by media, commercialism, and quantification.

I argue that this opposition between literature and the 'hypermediated' present is a false one. In the form that Knausgård has chosen to present his life-story, we recognize the influence of quantification and the emphasis on the 'self' that is paramount on social networking sites. Knausgård's urge to compile a monumental record of the everyday is a literary manifestation of contemporary culture's tendency to archival obsession, exhibitionism, and self-presentation in. This current trend, however, is part of a much longer media genealogy. Knausgård's purported mission, like Proust's before him, is to retrieve lost time, and his writing marks a contemporary affinity with collecting, storing, and archiving. These activities are at least as old as writing itself. However, due to an increase of storage spaces and the accompanying 'big data' philosophy (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013; cf. Van Dijck 2014), we currently record and archive memories on a larger scale than ever before.

Within this technocultural landscape, Knausgård reinvents the autobiographical as a monumental novel by incorporating the serial,

archival modes of self-representations of the internet, and the 'N=all' approach of big data, into his writing. Breaking the narrative mold and the subjective scope of the autobiographical novel, Knausgård constructs a monument to the self (and not only his own 'self') and the everyday.

This chapter examines how Knausgård's writing, in spite of his own Romantic ideals, closely intertwines with contemporary developments in media and technologies of self-representation and self-expression (e.g. self-photography, time-lapse videos, blogs, self-tracking, and automated diaries). Despite the author's professed aversion to a hyper-mediated present in which we are always transported 'elsewhere,' I argue that his writing, as a quantified mode of 'recording the self,' essentially does replicate individual self-expression on social media. *My Struggle* exemplifies how the autobiographical novel attains its monumental volume by adopting a quantitative mode of narrating-as-counting in which causality and closure make way for seriality. Moreover, I argue that the self-understanding that emanates from Knausgård's archival framework is *episodic* rather than narrative or diachronic: the instability of his sense of self over time and the gaps in his memories lend themselves to a serialized presentation in writing. The pervasiveness of such serial and episodic self-representations indicates a shift in autobiography that runs parallel to the shift from narrative to database. As we become progressively less diachronic or 'narrative' and more paratactic in our self-understanding, it transforms our conception of human subjectivity. Knausgård's monumental autobiography experiments with such alternative modes of representing subjective experience.

This chapter aims to generate new insights into the transformations of writing the self and the everyday under the influence of quantitative and serial forms of self-archiving in a digital age. How does monumental autobiography position itself vis-a-vis the new possibilities for self-(re)presentation offered by tracking software, quantifying strategies in representation, and social media? How does such a project of monumentalizing the self and the everyday tie into an age-old dream of immortality, of outliving the self's death by transferring (part of) it through onto an external support in media? How is this dream reinvented by digital tools and memory machines promising their users the power of 'total recall'? I answer these questions first.

Yet, these questions address but one side of the multidirectional relation between literature and new media. Even though, as we will see, strategies of recording the self and the everyday in the monumental novel are presently transformed under the influence of digitalization, datafication, and social media, there are still important media-specific differences that should be considered. The last section focuses on these differences. What does the monumental form of the novel add to the current media-scape marked by size, scale, seriality, and quantity? In this last section I first address critiques of big data's positivism, apparent

immediacy, and instantaneity (Columbia 2009; Chun 2011; Gitelman 2013; Van Dijck 2014). Underlying the 'N=all' approach of mapping and charting 'everything,' these critics warn us, is a newfound (and deeply problematic) belief in the objective power of numbers to reflect reality. Not only is the scale on which we can map and analyze phenomena larger than ever before: enthusiasts confidently state that big data "helps us get closer to reality" (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013: 49). In its attempts to bypass interpretation and representation, the philosophy of datafication envisions data as transparent and instantaneous (Ernst 2013; Hoskins 2011), and thereby denies their mediated character.

I contend that monumental novels like *My Struggle* embody a formal resistance to this perceived immediacy and simultaneity. They foreground the *mediacy* of literature as opposed to the transparency of data, and prose narrative's *delay* as opposed to simultaneity of recording online. Indeed, Knausgård's self-recording stumbles upon a formal obstruction in his medium of choice, the serialized autobiographical novel: "the book is a description of a struggle, it's a small struggle, a real struggle which is also the book itself" (qtd. in Fraser 2013). Because he does not smoothe over this resistance and his struggle to overcome it with the medium, I state, Knausgård's work adds something to the quantitative strategies of representation: something unique to literature, especially the novel. *My Struggle* promotes an awareness of writing as a digressive and regressive mode of recording that continuously lags behind life. This delay becomes meaningful as part of a provocative strategy to counter the new valuation of positivism and objectivity in datafication and Quantified Self.¹⁰⁸ As an alternative to these values, Knausgård practices a performativity of failure through the inscription of 'wasted time'. Within its monumental form, the autobiographical novel allows for a reconsideration of the qualitative self. My approach in this last section will therefore illuminate the unique properties and continued significance of the novel in the current media ecology.

Although this chapter first considers the transformations of size and scale in autobiographical literary writing under the influence of digital media, it also sheds light on the ways in which the monumental autobiography stresses the uniqueness of the book-bound novel

108 The term Quantified Self was coined by Gary Wolf and Kevin Kelly of *Wired* magazine in 2007. Quantified Selfers aim to track, map, and chart all possible data on the self in order to obtain "self-knowledge through numbers" (see <<http://quantifiedself.com>>). They are aided by new inventions like smart clothing and other forms of wearable computing technology that enable self-monitoring of physiological states and sensing of external data. With tracking apps like Runkeeper and FitBit, they make the body an interface for data generation. QS'ers use statistics to present their data and keep a record (or 'lifelog'), but also perform quantitative assessment to derive knowledge from their data. See also the website of Larry Smarr, founding Director of the California Institute for Telecommunications and Information Technology (Calit2) and expert on Quantified Self: <<http://lsmarr.calit2.net/>>

in contrast to the immediacy and perceived transparency of self-recording through new media. This dual focus allows us to lay bare the multi-directional connections between literature and new media, and offers insight into how the novel reinvents itself as monumental in a complex interaction with the digital, without being however absorbed by it.

3.1 A Rhetoric of Monumentality

*Bleib nicht auf ebnem Feld!
Steig nicht zu hoch hinaus!
Am schönsten sieht die Welt
Von halber Höhe aus.*

—Friedrich Nietzsche, “Welt-Klugheit”¹⁰⁹

In this first section I reconstruct a central argument that Knausgård makes in the more essayistic passages of his autobiographical series. These passages sketch a picture of a world hostile to literature and art, and subsequently propose his own novelistic project as a way of fighting this status quo. I analyze these sections in their rhetorical capacity to lay bare the mechanisms that Knausgård employs in order to validate his own monumental project. I conclude by proposing that the antithesis between Knausgård’s writing and these developments is illusory. Instead, they should be understood as engaging in a dialectical relationship, which I outline here and analyze in the rest of this chapter.

In my introduction, I wrote about pronouncements of the ‘death of the novel’ and how they rarely concern a literal claim for the novel’s demise. In reality, such ominous declarations often figure (barely) concealed pretexts to promote a new (often one’s own) way of writing literature. It is within this line of argumentation that Knausgård sketches a disenchanting world from which all meaning has been drained—a world that is contained and put at a safe distance through scientific discourse and communication technologies. On the basis of this dystopian assessment, he then sets up his own writing project as a crowbar that can break open this congealed, hermetic world. The author strategically uses these potentially alienating developments in science and technology in order to claim a renewed importance for his work. He reinvents the autobiographical novel as a monumental novel by first painting this

109 From *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1959: 6). Translation by Adrian del Carlo: “Worldly Wisdom”: “Stay not where the lowlands are! / Climb not into the sky! / The world looks best by far / when viewed from halfway high” (Nietzsche 2001: 12).

picture of a world in which 'authentic' art and literature have become impossibilities. He then offers his 'struggle' to the reader in an act of sacrifice, as the last-standing Romantic author.

With this line of argumentation in mind, this section reconstructs the main recurring issues of 'discontent' that Knausgård raises in his work. For one, he has pointed to the hyper-mediated character of daily life in Western Europe as a cause for his disgruntlement. In an interview he explains that

Everything's pictures, photographs, film, news ... everything is going on somewhere else. So this place, here, now, is, in a way, disappearing: I'm on the phone, I'm on the Internet, I read the papers: everything is somewhere else. ... I wanted to take the world back. (in De Geus 2011)

Knausgård resents the mediated displacement of (self)presence caused by communication technologies and media that constantly divert our attention elsewhere. Thereby, they cause the 'here and now' to continuously elude us.¹¹⁰ This concern has also found its way into his *My Struggle*-series:

We have access not only to our own lives but to almost all the other lives in our cultural circle, access not only to our own memories but to the memories of the whole of our damn culture, for I am you and you are everyone, we come from the same and are going to the same, and on the way we hear the same on the radio, see the same on TV, read the same in the press, and within us there is the same fauna of famous people's faces and smiles. (2013: 495-96)¹¹¹

110 When I write about *My Struggle* throughout this chapter, I refer to 'Knausgård' as the text's narrator. This signifier, insofar as it assumes the existence of an autobiographical 'I', is problematic, as we know from the works of Paul de Man (1979) and Jacques Derrida (1985). In autobiographical writing, the author is not an 'I' that precedes the texts and exists outside of it: on the contrary, the 'I' writes itself into being, it constructs itself in the text (see Ashley et al. 1994: 18). I by no means assume a one-on-one relation between the author's thoughts and opinions and those expressed in his work. On a related note, throughout the series, several long passages are included that read like essays on art and science, literature and society. When I write about these parts, as in the present section, I do not seek to elevate them to the status of 'theory'. Rather, I analyze these sections in their rhetorical capacity of justifying the monumental project of *My Struggle*.

111 Knausgård's argument echoes Walter Benjamin's thesis in "The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproduction" (1936), that the desire of the masses to "bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly" is directly conducive to the 'decay' of the aura (1999: 223). However, where Benjamin thus specifically points out that distance is an aspect

Of course, this omnipresence of technological mediation predates current 'new' media by far. It was already experienced, for instance, with the rise of the newspaper, which also solicited critiques for distracting its readers from the 'here and now' (Benjamin 1999: 155-56). As Yra van Dijk reminds us, there have always been new media (2014: 3). Moreover, the problem that Knausgård raises, and that fills him with a desire to 'take the world back,' is not strictly caused by media and technologies. As a long passage from *A Death in the Family* (2012) clarifies, he sees this issue as part of the larger development of what we might call demystification, to which science has also contributed:

In recent years the feeling that the world was small and that I grasped everything in it had grown stronger and stronger in me, despite my common sense telling me that actually the reverse was true: the world was boundless and unfathomable, the number of events infinite, the present time an open door that stood flapping in the wind of history. But that is not how it felt. It felt as if the world were known, fully explored and charted, that it could no longer move in unpredicted directions, that nothing new or surprising could happen. I understood myself, I understood my surroundings, I understood society around me, and if any phenomenon should appear mysterious I knew how to deal with it. (195-96)

This sense of having a firm intellectual grasp of the world is not a cause for celebration to Knausgård. Perceiving the world from a distance makes knowledge possible, but it also causes a steep decline in meaning: "As your perspective of the world increases not only is the pain it inflicts on you less but also its meaning. . . . Knowledge is distance, knowledge is stasis and the enemy of meaning" (2012: 10). Knausgård addresses a process of demystification that is much older, and whose network of causes is much more encompassing than new media and technology. In fact, it is one of the central problems of modernity that the author reassesses here.

We can understand this argument regarding distance in terms of a waning potential for sublimity. After all, when every object or phenomena is placed at the exact right distance for us to comprehend it, the possibilities of becoming overwhelmed, of being shocked or awe-struck, diminish as well. In this sense, the world that Knausgård describes here is in sharp contrast to the fragmented global world of

of the auratic experience, Knausgård suggests that distance is the problem. Placing phenomena at a safe distance, he repeatedly writes, enables extensive *knowledge* of the world but diminishes its *meaning*.

horror and excess that Bolaño evoked in 2666. Whereas from Bolaño's work a sublime of information overload emerged as the default setting for the globalized and hyper-connected present, Knausgård sketches an opposite perspective. The decline of religion and the influence of media and science have created a distance between subject and world, and thus taken away the blurred contours and obscurity of vision prerequisite for the sublime. In terms of the Kantian sublime, comprehension has replaced apprehension in the world as Knausgård imagines it:

If I saw an insect I hadn't come across, I knew that someone must have seen it before and categorized it. If I saw a shiny object in the sky I knew that it was either a rare meteorological phenomenon or a plane of some kind, perhaps a weather balloon, and if it was important it would be in the newspaper the following day. If I had forgotten something that happened in my childhood it was probably due to repression; if I became really furious about something it was probably due to projection, and the fact that I always tried to please people I met had something to do with my father and my relationship with him. (2012: 198)

Thus, according to Knausgård, reason does succeed in giving us 'the full picture,' even when this picture cannot be imagined or represented. But this is not an occasion for joy, as it was for Kant, since knowledge in this superficial sense is directly opposed to meaning. Knausgård thus sketches a world of the anti-sublime.¹¹²

One element of his world-view that this author does share with Bolaño is the recurrent thematic emphasis that he places on scale—thus in the passage cited above, the world has come to appear “small,” where in reality it is “boundless.” According to Knausgård, humans have charted and mapped everything from the microscopic to the cosmos, thus adapting everything to our vision:

112 The picture that Knausgård paints is reminiscent of Manovich's discussion of data visualizations that map the informational chaos of big data onto abstract, well-ordered forms that enable us to clearly discern their patterns, as “anti-sublime”: “If Romantic artists thought of certain phenomena and effects as un-representable, as something which goes beyond the limits of human senses and reason, data visualization artists aim at precisely the opposite: to map such phenomena into a representation whose scale is comparable to the scales of human perception and cognition” (Manovich 2002: n.p.). In their desire to bring phenomena that are normally beyond the scale of human the senses within our reach, to make them manageable, Manovich aligns these data artists with modern science. We see that Knausgård's observations of the modern world-view as inspired by science and media resonates with Manovich's judgment of such visualizations.

Things that are too small to see with the naked eye, such as molecules and atoms, we magnify. Things that are too large, like cloud formations, river deltas, constellations, we reduce. At length we bring it within the scope of our senses and we stabilise it with fixer. (2012: 10)

Contra big data fanatics, Knausgård's argument goes, mapping 'everything' makes the world appear small and contained.

As in Borges's "Library of Babel" and "The Aleph," however, the opposite of the contained, the infinite, does not allow for greater meaning either. Knausgård muses on this problem of large-scale perspective when he evokes the idea of infinity as infinite divisibility, an idea that we also found in Locke's philosophy: "What if [our universe] resided in a grain of sand in another world? And this world would also be small and reside in a grain of sand?" (Knausgård 2014a: 386).¹¹³ In such a scenario, the narrator ponders, everything would be rendered small and insignificant by comparison: the young Knausgård might as well abandon his studies of literature, since this activity would be useless in such an infinite universe. If, on the other hand, there is only one world, art and literature might be among the most important things with which to occupy oneself.

The realization that meaning is dependent on scale and perspective incites the author throughout this series to 'try out' different scales and points of view, to 'zoom' in and out. On the one hand, he focuses on the big and long-term: "In the same way that the heart does not care which life it beats for, the city does not care who fulfills its various functions" (2012: 173). On the other, he zooms in on the narrow and insignificant: "daily life with its endless sequence of small demands and small obligations, petty chitchat and petty agreements formed a fence around us" (2013a: 446). This oscillation between scales¹¹⁴ alternately brings meaning in and out of view, as it mimics a rhythm that he finds performed in life: "[m]eaningful, meaningless, meaningful, meaningless, this is the wave that washes through our lives and creates its inherent tension" (2014: 9). Thus,

113 In this quote, Knausgård references William Blake's poem "Auguries of Innocence" (1866): "To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower / Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand / And Eternity in an hour" (2000: 285-89).

114 In a similar 'zooming' movement, the narrator continuously shifts between a big and small perspective on the self, of the loser and the winner: "the doubts that colored such a large part of my thinking never applied to the larger picture but always the smaller, the one associated with my closer surroundings, friends, acquaintances, girls, who, I was convinced, always held a low opinion of me, considered me an idiot, which burned inside me, every day it burned inside me; however, as far as the larger picture was concerned, I never had any doubt that I could attain whatever I wanted, I knew I had it in me, because my yearnings were so strong and they never found any rest. How could they? How else was I going to crush everyone?" (2012: 320)

My Struggle variedly performs close and distant readings of the world.

Through his musings on the finite and infinite regression, the narrator, moreover, expresses a longing for what he calls the 'beyond'. As part of his rhetoric of monumentalism, and after having set up his dystopian worldview, Knausgård superimposes an image of himself as a belated figure. He expresses nostalgia for a pre-Enlightenment world and for Romanticism with its reverence for sublime nature, as reactions to the decline of religion, magic, and the sacred. In previous times, he believes, the world was still saturated with purpose and meaning:

[M]an was subordinate to the Divine through to the Age of Enlightenment, and to the landscape he was depicted in during Romanticism - the mountains are vast and intense, the sea is vast and intense, even the trees are vast and intense while humans, without exception, are small. (2012: 199)

With the Enlightenment and after Romanticism, he proceeds, a shift occurred. In Norwegian art, Knausgård situates the turning point specifically with the paintings of Edvard Munch: "it was in his paintings that, for the first time, man took up all the space. . . . It is as if humans swallow up everything, make everything theirs. The mountains, the sea, the trees, and the forests, everything is colored by humanness" (2012: 200).

This modernist a world is enclosed, he writes, because it does not posit a *beyond* to itself: "Art does not know a beyond, science does not know a beyond, religion does not know a beyond, not anymore. . . . The limits of that which cannot speak to us - the unfathomable - no longer exist" (200). This expression of *Sehnsucht* situates Knausgård within a Romantic longing for the infinite. Such a longing, as discussed, repeats itself infinitely because of its determination to prevent its own realization. But the author's nostalgic longing for an infinite that was never within reach, albeit anachronistic, is not entirely naïve.¹¹⁵ Rather, it is a self-conscious posture and a strategy to imbue his writing with cultural importance. Notwithstanding his emphasis on transparency and authenticity, the author plays a game of locating himself in this tradition of longing for a 'beyond'. As James Kirwan writes, the "feeling that the world is too small for the self, . . . is the badge of genius" in Romanticism (2005: 121).

115 Knausgård's narrator is obviously aware of the impossibility of going back, and of the outdated status of his ideals. He is torn between the perspective of a 'knowing' student of literature who has been schooled in a tradition that deconstructs Romantic notions such as genius on the one hand and, on the other, his own, deeply felt beliefs. Of these feelings he is deeply ashamed, as he knows them, rationally, to be untrue. Still, he cannot shake them off: "a conviction was rooted inside me, and although it was essentialist, that is, outmoded and, furthermore, romantic, I could not get past it" (2012: 197).

Through his rhetoric of monumentality, Knausgård pins this badge of authenticity on his own chest.

The narrator of *My Struggle* strikes this pose of the misunderstood Romantic in various ways. One of the elements of nineteenth-century monumentalism that reappears in today's monumental novels, as I highlighted in chapter one, is a preference for solitary artists who suffer for art in order to prove their worthiness of posthumous apotheosis. Knausgård answers to this model. The publication of his work caused his relatives to condemn him for the exposure of their personal lives. Thus, writing came with the cost of an even graver sense of (self-chosen) isolation. As I relate in more detail below, Knausgård explicitly values 'writing' over 'life' (a false opposition since the two are inextricably bound together), including family life and the commitments that come with it. This false choice causes recurrent conflicts: sacrifice pervades Knausgård's writing in its thematic emphasis on being misunderstood, on longing and suffering. Through all these tropes and strategies, the author offers himself to the reader in an act of self-sacrifice as one of the last-standing Romantic author. This rhetorical posture should make his work rare and valuable.

Knausgård's self-professed longing for the 'beyond' is not only present as an authorial posture, but finds its way into the form of his novels as well. Later we will see how, as in Bolaño's writing, *Sehnsucht* in-forms structures of open-endedness and digressive narration in *My Struggle*. These are Knausgård's weapons of choice to battle the decline of meaning he diagnoses. Against the enclosed world of maps, charts, and numbers, his self-consciously anachronistic mission is "to open the world by writing" (197), to "burst the balloon that is the world and let everything in it spill over the sides" (2013: 496). In the next section I nuance these adversarial statements by mapping the rather more complex interrelations between Knausgård's writing and the status quo of the 'hyper-mediated' present he seeks to affront. I will argue that *My Struggle* is thoroughly (albeit implicitly) influenced by recent developments in (self-)representation in new media and technology—such as selfies, weblogs, status updates, and the 'Quantified Self' movement.

3.2 Archiving the Self in New Media and the Monumental Autobiography

Time wastes too fast: every letter I trace tells me with what rapidity Life follows my pen

— Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*¹¹⁶

3.2.1 In search of lost time

I have so far identified the combative strategy by which Knausgård offers his own monumental project as indispensable to open up a world that has been sealed off by the ‘distancing’ techniques of media, science, and modern communication technologies. According to *My Struggle*’s ‘grand narrative’ of disenchantment, these are the factors which, in their enforcement of a ‘bigger’ perspective on the world—the ‘full picture’ or ‘N=all’—have led to a steep decrease of meaning. Through writing, Knausgård sets out to restore meaning to a disenchanted world.

An important part of this quest lies in the attempt to establish a sense of continuity and causality in the face of passing time. Thus in the first volume, *A Death in the Family* (2012), Knausgård sets out from the existential question “How did I end up here? Why did things turn out like *this*?” (25). His quest for meaning is also a search for self-knowledge:

In the window before me I can vaguely make out the reflection of my face. Apart from one eye, which is glistening, and the area immediately beneath, which dimly reflects a little light, the whole of the left side is in shadow. Two deep furrows divide my forehead, one deep furrow intersects each cheek, all of them as if filled with darkness, and with the eyes staring and serious, and the corners of the mouth drooping, it is impossible not to consider this face gloomy. What has engraved itself in my face? (22)

In such reflections, Knausgård identifies the material and physical traces of time that has ‘etched’ itself into the body and objects. Expressing desperation over the short-lived and the ephemeral, he looks for the lasting trace, as arguably most writers do.

In this respect, critics (e.g. De la Durantaye 2013) have justifiably compared *My Struggle* to Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913). Like Proust’s before him, Knausgård’s purported mission is to retrieve lost time. To this end, the form of narrative would be an obvious choice. According to Brooks, narrative “has to do with the recovery of the

116 (2009, 9: 8, 427)

past, and more generally with the attempted rescue of meaning from passing time" (1984: 321). Frank Kermode, also, insists on this relation of narrative to time. He argues that it answers the "need to speak humanly of a life's importance in relation to [the world]—a need in the moment of existence to belong, to be related to a beginning and to an end" (1966: 4). Both Brooks and Kermode explicitly link narrative's retrieval of lost time to a recuperation of meaning. Yet, despite this characteristic, the overarching structure of Knausgård's self-representations is archival rather than narrative.¹¹⁷

This loss of meaning and the waning of the original impact of events are sources of anxiety for Knausgård. The author resorts to writing in order to halt this process of fading, to restore and fix the original experiences and thus regain the meaning that was lost with the passing of time. He seeks to (re)construct a personal history where there are only fragments: "I had no history, and so I made myself one, much as a Nazi party might in a satellite suburb" (2012: 179).¹¹⁸ By gathering and recording an enormous amount of memorial material between the covers of his novels, Knausgård engages in *self-monumentalization*, erecting a 'monument of, and to, the self'. Seeking to retrieve and ground a sense of self in a fast-changing environment, *My Struggle* longs for permanence. In this sense, his mission is not so different from the project of the autobiographical novel in general. It is, however, in the extraordinary, monumental scale on which this self-presentation takes place.

This section puts forth that *My Struggle's* monumentality deeply intertwines with ubiquitous modes of self-expression in new media. Indeed, a closer look at his strategies of monumentalizing the self reveals how Knausgård's chosen mode of representation does not diverge in relation to big data and more contemporary modes of online self-representation. If my hypothesis is right, and the author's writing emulates big data and strategies of quantification, then Knausgård's self-portrayal and claim to be an anachronistic, literary resistance fighter will be seriously undermined.

117 Both the archival and the narrative are strategies of self-representation that help can help retrieve meaning, but they differ in how they do this. Narrative creates meaning through causality and closure; the archival presents a human life as serial, open-ended, and paratactic. As I argue in the next section, an archival self-presentation lends itself to an episodic rather than a diachronic understanding of the self, one that is not continuous over time.

118 He explains this lack of, and desire for, historical sense by pointing out the fact that his youth took place in Tybakken, in a new housing development in Norway in the 1970s—a place and time that centered around renewal, not origins: "in our heads we were not only modern 1970s people, our surroundings were also modern 1970s surroundings. And our feelings, those that swept through each and every one of us living there on these spring evenings, were modern feelings, with no other history than our own. And for those of us who were children, that meant no history. Everything was happening for the first time" (2014: 220)

In order to substantiate my hypothesis, I will first look more closely at 'archival' self-representations through new media. I address the fears and desires informing these practices and ask why they are so pervasive today. I then frame Knausgård's writing in these practices. Rather than construing an overarching narrative structure for his life-story and thus relating it to a beginning and end (narrative's function of rescuing lost time according to Brooks and Kermode), Knausgård envisions memory as 'archival'. This has important ramifications for the self-understanding that emanates from these texts. Situating contemporary literary autobiography within this larger constellation of practices of archiving the self in digital media will lay bare the factors that inspire the monumentality of *My Struggle*, as well as the particular conception of memory that informs these novels.

3.2.2 Archiving the self in a digital age: from vanitas to total recall

As José van Dijck points out in *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age*, our (self)representations have always been intricately tied up with the technological means available (2007: 7). In the same way technologies such as the convex mirror shaped the self-portrait, we are conditioned today to see ourselves through digital technologies such as selfies, blogs, Facebook pages, activity trackers, and GPS:

Whether we use a wearable, networked step-counter or a convex mirror and oil paints, technology can reflect back to us a version of who we are. And the data, filters and social media we use to see and share our reflections distort our images in their own particular ways, just as Parmigianino's convex mirror distorted the perspective of his face. (Rettberg 2014: 2)

In other words, media are by no means transparent: they shape the way we look at ourselves.

Moreover, it should be noted that new forms of self-representation are not 'new' in any absolute sense. In *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology* (2014), Jill Walker Rettberg explores contemporary practices of written, visual, and quantitative self-representation through digital media, with a focus on their pre-digital genealogies. Current forms such as the blog and the written status update on social media, she shows, have evolved from the diary, the perzine, memoir, and autobiography; selfies are premediated by artist's self-portraits; and quantitative life logging and activity tracking derive from age-old practices of accounting and listing. When I argue that *My Struggle* incorporates elements from digital media, I am suggesting it partakes in this complex genealogy that informs media ecology. The practice of assembling an archive of the self, in particular, by far predates the digital age. Many of today's quotidian

engagements with self-expression through media were anticipated in the arts: “centuries of diaries and self-portraits, flash narratives that are as short as tweets, photocopied zines that episodically tell stories from the artist-author’s life and artists ... who have taken photos of themselves every hour for a year” (Rettberg 35).¹¹⁹ Take for example Andy Warhol’s *Time Capsules* and Buckminster Fuller’s *Chronofile*. The latter is possibly the most extensive self-documentation ever recorded, encompassing not only his own life but all technological and scientific inventions and cultural developments during his life span (see Vesna 2007: 261). Both of these artistic achievements pre-mediate today’s preoccupation with recording personal memory. The practice of recording ‘everything’ first arose as an aesthetic possibility in (avant-garde) art, and only attained ubiquity when the technological means became widely available. But what motivates the urge to gather all possible traces of one’s life?

According to Victoria Vesna, archiving the self, like narrative, is inspired by the awareness of time passing:

Collecting, storing, and archiving is very much connected to time, to our anxiety over the loss of time, and to the speed at which time travels. We preserve the all-important self in this age of relentless movement by creating a memory bank that testifies to our existence. (2007: 25)

Archiving thus stems from a desire to fix and curate the self amongst rapid change. But if archiving the self is of all times and places, what gives the topic its particular urgency today? I propose three factors that contribute to the present situation: a perceived lack of time due to a hyper-connectivity, a wish to regain control over the traces we leave, and a fear of forgetting and being forgotten.

To bring across the first reason for the archival urge, we have to revisit the topic of information overload. An important asset of the present-day excess of information is that it enables us to almost immediately retrieve vast bodies of data from almost every point in the past and the present. Everyday life is enveloped in real-time transmission or nearly instantaneous communications. Andrew Hoskins calls this development the ‘Connective Turn’ in media: an “emergent set of

119 In “Frank O’Hara and the Poetics of the Digital,” Todd Tietchen argues that even the Tweet and other forms of ‘microblogging’ have their artistic ancestor: Frank O’Hara’s *Lunch Poems* (1964), which he wrote during his lunch breaks. Like the 140 characters of the tweet, Tietchen argues, “[t]he poetic in this instance presents itself as a condensed temporality of self-expression, [making it possible] to engage in self-authoring while frenetically involved in our quotidian demands” (2014: 49). Knausgård, as we will see, for similar reasons of integrating self-expression with the mundane tasks of life, resorts to the opposite strategy: monumentalism.

tensions and transitions availed through the abundance, pervasiveness and accessibility of communication networks, nodes, and digital media content" (2011: 20). The imperative is to be connected *all the time*, in a simultaneity that Marshall McLuhan presciently described as *allatonce* (1962: 72). With lifelogs, wearable computing, and the biometric sensing technologies of Quantified Self, we are close to fulfilling Manovich's prediction that it would be "only a matter of time before the constant broadcasting of one's life becomes as common as email" (2008: 74).

This instantaneity is of practical value, but it also poses a challenge. For who will read, watch, and listen to all this mediated content? When will we have time to form new memories? Recording and living seem in direct competition in a technocultural landscape of immediacy. "Overwhelmed by the volume and velocity of our lives," as Sherry Turkle assesses this paradoxical state of affairs, "we turn to technology to help us find time. But technology makes us busier than ever and ever more in search of retreat. Gradually, we come to see our online life as life itself" (2011: 17). In the final instance, the result of our ongoing exposure to, and attempts to handle, all this information registers as a *lack of time*: "information overflow ... results in feeling overwhelmed and having a sense of no time. In fact, there is no time, except for our collective construction of a relationship to the ever-present change" (Vesna 2007: 21). An urgent question that arises, is how to make up for the time we lose as we come to terms with the loss of time. Proust's pursuit of 'lost time' is urgent as ever. As an answer to this problem, users of new media record and archive data of the self in order to store 'time' and thus prevent it from slipping away.

A second reason for the popularity of archival practices relates to issues of control over our digital traces (Reigeluth 2014). Our selves are being quantified even if we don't actively participate in shaping our data, and we are increasingly aware of the circulation of these traces. Whether we like it or not, everything we do leaves a stream of ones and zeroes in our wake. Paul McFedries (2013) recently coined the term "digital exhaust" for these ever more voluminous traces of all traceable and storable actions we perform in daily life. With pervasive surveillance and warnings of privacy-infringement (see Van Dijck 2014), issues of data ownership lead to an intense engagement with online self-expression and self-possession. The question of control arises, of managing the traces we leave. How do we want to present ourselves, to be perceived (now, in the future, and posthumously), in a hyper-connective culture marked by exhibitionism and surveillance?

Increased use of media to record the self (such as selfies, blogs, and fitness apps) can be seen as a way to regain control over our data. The important question becomes, not *if* we should leave traces (any decision not to would involve some drastic life choices), but *how* to manage and organize our digital footprints. Self-representation through new media

becomes a performative action, an attempt to recover a minimum of power over how we are perceived: "How do we differentiate ourselves and leave behind a trace of our existence on this planet?" (Vesna 2007: 21). And for whom do we go through the trouble of managing these traces? Do they compile a monument to and for the self, or a database for others to browse? I will now briefly give a set of examples of this process of archiving the self in contemporary media use, before I compare them to Knausgård's writing. I choose to highlight the serial selfie and the time-lapse video, since these share with monumental writing certain motivations as I argue here (as well as an aesthetics of scale and seriality that I discuss in the next section).

The photographic exhibition *Selfmade* by the Dutch author Heleen van Royen clearly exemplifies the search for continuity through self-representation. For years, Van Royen obsessively uploaded revealing 'selfies' on social media websites, soliciting the predictable critiques of exhibitionism. Calling the project a "photographic self-investigation," she states that photography allows her to reflect on the passing of time. For van Royen, this universal theme is closely connected to aesthetic issues of aging and preservation. The idea for *Selfmade*, she explains, came from seeing the *Venus de Milo*, which, unlike herself, is unchanging: "Now that I'm approaching fifty, the urge to record is stronger than ever, just like my attempts at physical conservation" (2014, my translation). Recording here serves the goal of fixation, of eternalizing the changing self as it appeared at a particular moment in time (a wish of self-monumentalization that is the inverse of the relation to the self-portrait of Oscar Wilde's Dorian Grey). Van Royen is certainly not the first to practice self-photography at regular intervals, nor is hers the most extreme case known.¹²⁰ Still, this example is helpful since it highlights the incentives for archiving the self that also inspired Knausgård. Van Royen's project thematizes the fear of time passing too quickly and the desire to take control over the way one is perceived, with an emphasis on the material traces that time leaves on the body.

The practice of making digital photographs into time-lapse videos even more emphatically brings out the pursuit of continuity. After Ahree Lee's immensely popular video *Me* (2006) and Noah Kalina's *Everyday* (2006), many have used websites like dailymugshot.com to create a time-lapse of their faces, pregnant bellies or weight loss achievements.

120 There are numerous other examples of large-scale self-photography, such as the artist Tehching Hsieh who has taken photos of himself every hour for a year. Hsieh's *One Year Performance 1980-81* is also known as the 'Time Clock Piece,' because his modus operandi consisted of hourly punching a clock in his studio, taking a photograph each time. These self-portraits were captured on 16mm film, one on each frame of the filmstrip. At the end of the year he compiled these into a six-minute clip of his face. More recently, the artist Suzanne Szucs collected and exhibited the harvest of fifteen years of daily self-photography in Polaroid format (Rettberg 2014: 34-7).

As with Van Royen's selfies, the fascination and satisfaction of viewing these clips lies in noticing the changes that occur over time. Thus Lee compares the time-lapse video of her face to the 'vanitas' in painting:

For me personally, the photos serve as a mirror in which I can examine my own image and possibly see myself as others see me. The act of taking and looking at my own photo is similar to what women do every day when they look into the mirror and assess their own appearance. In our culture we demand that images of women be youthful and attractive, but implicit in this sequence is that over time the woman in the photos will age. As in the vanitas tradition of still life painting, implicit in "Me" is the ephemerality of physical appearance and the inevitability of aging and mortality. (Lee, website)

The fact that self-knowledge is mentioned as the incentive for both these examples of self-photography goes some way in nuancing derogatory views of the selfie practice, that condemn the narcissism and exhibitionism of the 'look-at-me generation' (Freedland 2013; Orlet 2007). Instead, Van Royen and Lee point to an understanding of these new media practices as continuations of a much older tradition in cultural history, including the diary, autobiography, and the self-portrait. It is no coincidence that both refer to classical arts, respectively painting and sculpture: themes of transitoriness and preservation have for ages been central to these arts. Digitalization simply renders such forms of expression more widely available. The current popularity of self-representation through social media can be seen as the latest step in a long process of emancipation of the universal urge to investigate the self through the eyes of the other.¹²¹

A third motivation for the archival obsession is the fear of forgetting. In this context one can think of the theme of amnesia as foregrounded in films of the last decades like *Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* as well as in novels like *Remainder* and *The Raw Shark Texts* (see Brillenburg Wurth and Van de Ven 2012). This fear of forgetting, however, is not exclusive to fiction, as it leads to the dream of *total recall*, a utopian vision that has also occupied computer engineers. Van Dijck (2005) discusses a number of recent developments in research of 'digital personal memory machines'.¹²² These projects promise to infinitely

121 For the first time in history, digital photography through Smartphones has made it possible to simultaneously *see* our reflection and *record* it (mirrors allowed for the first but not the second; with cameras that had no front-facing display such as the Smartphone's, this is reversed). This allows for a larger measure of control over how we are represented. (Warfield 2014 qtd. in Rettberg 2014: 9).

122 These projects, she explains, are the latest step in a long process of memory

expand the storage space available for personal memory. One example of memory augmentation is MyLifeBits, a major software research project developed for Microsoft by the programming pioneer Gordon Bell. MyLifeBits manifestly sets out to 'remedy' forgetfulness once and for all.¹²³ The program consists of a database that (almost literally) contains the digital distillation of your every waking minute, including e-mails, keystrokes, recorded phone calls, images, and video (included is an automatic 'sense cam' to be worn on the body), and every Web page ever visited. The database containing all this personal information is built for instant search and retrieval—a development that Van Dijck calls the "Googlization of memory" (2005: 323).¹²⁴

As more and more objects and places are computationally enhanced and networked, researchers are working towards the 'Internet of Things,' a vast interconnection of uniquely identifiable computing devices (including so-called 'smart objects'), embedded within the existing infrastructure of the Internet (see Balandin et al. 2014; Fortino and Trunfio 2014). With detailed automated life logs as produced by 'Google glass,' nothing would ever be irretrievable: we could perform a retrospective search in our own memory database for every sensory experience we have ever had. The website of the 'Narrative Clip,' a wearable automatic camera that takes a picture every minute, regardless of what is in view, dictates us to "remember every moment" (2014).

Eventually, these researchers believe, such technologies should someday 'cure' the human ills of forgetfulness altogether. 'Total recall'

externalization that once started with census-taking and accounts, to then develop into techniques like writing, the printing press, and search engines. Thus in 1945, Vannevar Bush famously set out the blueprint for the electronic age in his article "As We May Think". Here Bush introduced the Memex, "a device in which an individual stores all his books, records, and communications, and which is mechanized so that it may be consulted with exceeding speed and flexibility. It is . . . an enlarged intimate supplement to his memory" (14). With this device, Bush premediated today's obsession with recording, that has led to the development of memory augmentation systems envisioning the computer as a monumental locus for storage and retrieval of memories, a 'universal memory machine'.

123 See the website for Microsoft's ongoing MyLifeBits project, <<http://research.microsoft.com/barc/MediaPresence/MyLifeBits.aspx>>. See also the book by Gordon Bell and Jim Gemmell, *Total Recall: How the E-memory Revolution Will Change Everything* (2009), where they relate years of experience using MyLifeBits ("Your Life Uploaded. The Digital Way to Better Health, Memory and Productivity").

124 As van Dijck (2005) writes, the tendency to understand human memory in terms of the available media formats is an old one, of which 'Googlization' is simply the latest manifestation: think of the notion of a 'panoramic flashback' that has been common since the nineteenth century, and the idea that before dying, your life flashes in front of your eyes like a movie. Thus, we project photographic and cinematic devices to physical-psychological process.

is no longer restricted to (science) fiction.¹²⁵ Of course the developers and advertisers of these applications typically present this as a positive prospect, but (apart from issues of feasibility which I discuss below) the desirability of ‘remembering every moment’ is debatable. Thus Evgeny Morozov cynically sketches a future in which life logs have become ubiquitous, making involuntary memory obsolete:

No need to feel nostalgic, Proust-style, about the petite madeleines you devoured as a child; since that moment is surely stored somewhere in your Smartphone—or, more likely, your smart, all-recording glasses—you can stop fantasizing and simply rewind to it directly. (2013: x-xi)

Of course, involuntary or selective remembrance and strategic forgetting are not just evolutionary ‘bugs’ to be overcome.

I have assessed the different factors that contribute to the preoccupation with recording one’s traces in new media (a sense of having no time due to the hyper-connectivity of online presence, a wish to exert control over one’s own data, and the fear of forgetting). Now that I have mapped these underlying motivations, ambitions, and anxieties, I can proceed to ask how they inform the autobiographical novel as it becomes monumental.¹²⁶

3.2.3 ‘This ghetto-like state of incompleteness’: archival memory

First, let us ask how *My Struggle* breaks the mold of the more traditional biography. Rather than construing his series chronologically and

125 There are many examples of fictional works that deal with the theme of total recall. Think of films like *The Final Cut* (2004, dir. Omar Naim), *Blade Runner* (1982, dir. Ridley Scott), and *Total Recall* (1990 and 2012; resp. Paul Verhoeven and Len Wiseman), as well as short stories like Borges’s dystopian “Funes el memorioso” (1942), Danilo Kiš’s “The Encyclopedia of the Dead (A Whole Life)” (1983), and Philip K. Dick’s “We Can Remember It for You Wholesale” (1966). From these examples we can derive two facts: the occupation with memory and amnesia predates digital media, and this topic has mostly been explored in films and short stories. Monumental novels are part of this older tradition, but differ in their enactment of these concerns with memory through their volume and quantitative strategies (a topic that my next section on quantification and seriality analyzes more deeply).

126 Even though my aim in this section is to lay bare *My Struggle*’s similarities with new media of self-expression such as selfies and blogs, I should mention that there are at least as many differences between Knausgård’s representations of the self and these new media. To name the most important one, the latter are often visual, and therefore more blatantly exhibitionist. *My Struggle* is intended for a large audience and the author engages in self-exposure, yet in a non-visual way. As I argue in my conclusion to this chapter, this hybrid position between the representational strategies of media of archiving the self transgresses and thus defamiliarizes exhibitionist practices that we are familiar with from social media.

devoting each volume to a certain phase in his life, Knausgård structures the volumes thematically, around different roles like 'son,' 'father,' 'lover,' and 'writer' (with many repetitions and overlaps across the volumes, as we will see). As this works out, he dedicates not the first, but the third volume of *My Struggle* largely to his childhood. In doing so, he problematizes the convention of autobiographical narration to commence with one's earliest memories. Reading the novels, this subversion does not become clear immediately. When we look at the opening of this third volume, *Boyhood Island* (2014), it starts out in a typically novelistic fashion:

One mild, overcast day in August 1969 a bus came winding its way along a narrow road at the far end of an island in southern Norway, between gardens and rocks, meadows and woods, up and down dale, round sharp bends, sometimes with trees on both sides as if through a tunnel, sometimes with the sea straight ahead. (2)

We recognize the narrative conventions. The narrator sets the scene by detailed descriptions of the scenery and the colors of the bus, for instance. Then the bus comes to a halt, and he zooms in on the protagonists of his story – “out stepped a little family” (*Ibid.*) – who are likewise described in full detail. They are the author's father, mother, older brother Yngve, and baby Karl Ove himself. We learn that they have travelled from Oslo, ready to move into their newly built house on the island of Tromøya. The next pages offer short background stories of his parents, providing biographical information on their parents and grandparents, their home regions, their social class. The narration reveals a strong emphasis on history: generational history, the history of the country-side as the family walks through it, the most important historic sites of Tromøya, and the historic style of the houses. The reader is fully immersed in this narrative genealogy of a typical Norwegian family and clearly envisions the colors of the “1960s pram with a baby dressed in 1960s baby togs, white with lace trimmings everywhere” (4).

Then suddenly, the whole scene is revealed as a set-up. By reminding us that he cannot possibly have any recollection of these events, Knausgård brusquely defamiliarizes the novelistic conventions of this (pre-)history in which he embedded himself: “Of course I don't remember any of this time”; “any memory of my first six years is virtually non-existent. I have no idea who took care of me, what I did, who I played with, it has all completely gone” (6; 10). By pointing to the conventional character of narrative beginnings, he problematizes autobiographical narrative as a 'natural' way of presenting a life. This suggests that any life-story necessarily contains gaps that are filled through (micro-narrative) fictions. From that moment onward, the continuity of memories

displayed in these first pages will not return. As much as he longs for a strong sense of personal history, all Knausgård has to work with are little bits and scraps: “This ghetto-like state of incompleteness is what I call my childhood” (10).

This emphasis on gaps and incompleteness that goes against narrative continuity sets the tone for Knausgård’s representations of his memories.¹²⁷ Throughout the six volumes, the author keeps reminding the reader how little there is left of certain periods in his life: e.g. “the years 1969-1974 are a great big hole in my life” (2014: 10); “Now I had burned all the diaries and notes I had written, there was barely a trace left of the person I was until I turned twenty-five” (2012: 312). The fifth book, which relates the years he spent at Bergen’s writers’ academy, starts out again by cataloguing the meager traces of this particular part of his past:

The fourteen years I lived in Bergen, from 1988 to 2002, are long gone, there are no traces left of them except in the form of episodes which a few people might still remember, here a flash in a head, there a flash in a head, and of course everything I myself remember from that time. But that is surprisingly little. . . . I have written a diary, I burned it. I’ve taken a few picture, twelve of which I still have, they are lying on a heap on the floor next to my desk, along with all the letters I received in this period. (2014a: 7)

This insistence on forgetfulness and his erasure of memory objects might strike us as remarkable in an author who has written a 3600-page autobiographical series. Yet, it is in this seeming paradox that the archival impulse underlying *My Struggle* reveals itself. Knausgård often starts passages with an inventory of the dispersed material and mental traces of the past, which are left over from a certain period: his “mediated memory objects” (Van Dijck 2007). Examples include old comic books, his father’s diary, photographs, his record collection, letters, and certain objects that trigger specific (sensuous) memories such as his mother’s kitchen appliances or old brands of cleaning product. The process of recording these scraps and traces in writing catalyzes recollection, generating an abundance of smaller narratives—some incoherent, some repetitive or overlapping—that in turn trigger new recollections. “It was peculiar how close everything came again,” Knausgård remarks.

127 The insistence on gaps and absences is an archival trope in itself, as Ernst argues: “it is not the data but the gaps which define the archive”. In contrast to historiography in a more narrative sense, which “privileges the notion of continuity in order to re-affirm the possibility of subjectivity” (which is what Knausgård desires but does not achieve), the archival is marked by “discontinuities, gaps and absences, silence and ruptures” (qtd. in Lovink 2003).

“Sitting down behind the typewriter was like opening a door that offered entrance to that” (2013a 356-57). Once this mechanism is put to work, it is self-perpetuating. He combines and recombines elements according to an associative logic and produces the memories *while he records* them. As in 2666, an abundance of narrativity is framed within an archival structure.

Aleida Assmann’s distinction between “archival memory” (*Speichergedächtnis*) and “working memory” (*Funktionsgedächtnis*) (1999: 18-22) illuminates this process of remembrance through acts of inventory. Archival memory, she proposes, is a latent form of memory that comprises a virtual storehouse of information about the past which might be actualized as a source for recollection.¹²⁸ Working memory, then, is the outcome of those selective acts of remembrance that are actually performed. Assmann employs these terms to make sense of the workings of collective memory. Yet the distinction is also useful when thinking about personal memory.¹²⁹ We can use it to clarify Knausgård’s writing project. This writing is not a record of memories that pre-exist it. Rather, he starts out by pointing to the many gaps and blind spots in his working memory. Then gradually, through association, his archival memory comes to the surface. These memories attain actuality only in writing which, we could say, for Knausgård is a process of *anamnesis*. It draws memories out of the dark recesses of unconsciousness, so that recollection occurs as the overcoming of oblivion (Rigney 2005: 17). Forgetting, here, precedes remembrance instead of the other way around.

Material objects of memory play an ambivalent role in this process, as they both enable and obstruct it. In drawing latent memories out of his personal archive and actualizing them into working memories through writing, Knausgård deems of little merit the few externalized forms of memory and self-representation at his disposal, such as photographs and letters. For example, the narrator questions the usefulness of photographic ‘evidence’ when it comes to making sense of the past. The photographs in his personal archive are “voids,” that do not transmit meaning, even less identity. Whereas they do succeed in capturing a general *Zeitgeist*, Knausgård feels that they are highly impersonal: “One might imagine that these photos represent some kind of memory, that they are reminiscences, except that the “me” reminiscences usually rely on is

128 Thinking back on my discussion of the database in previous chapters, note that Assmann’s category of ‘archival memory’ corresponds to Manovich’s ‘paradigm’. Both function as a virtual inventory of all the elements to choose from, that can then be the basis for the construction of narrative (or syntagmatic) sequences.

129 This is underwritten by Derrida’s conception of the archival as a mental process (1995), as discussed in chapter one of the present thesis. Derrida, by way of Freud’s theory of the unconscious, sees the archive as a feature of our mental lives. All human beings, he writes, suffer from *mal d’archive*, the compulsion toward archiving.

not there" (2014: 8-9). In terms of Roland Barthes's famous distinction in *Camera Lucida* (1981), the pictures of his youth have a 'studium'. They transmit (cultural) knowledge or information, in this case about an era: we get a sense of what people wore, the colors, the interiors of rooms, the activities people engaged in. But to Knausgård, they lack a 'punctum,' a personal meaning that "rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me" (Barthes 26-7).¹³⁰ Knausgård's assessment of his personal photographs is more on par with that of Siegfried Kracauer who, in his essay "Photography" (1927), also denies the photograph's capacity to convey meaning:

While photography grasps what is given as a spatial (or temporal) continuum, memory images preserve the given in so far as it means something . . . from the viewpoint of memory images, photography seems a jumble of things made up in part of detritus. (2014: 31)

Photographs, both Knausgård and Kracauer state, in themselves do not signify anything; they need human memory to inject them with meaning.

Yet, even when they do not succeed in transmitting a unique presence or sense of self, Knausgård's personal archive of photographs, letters, and other remains of the past are valuable to him as catalysts for the process of remembrance. These remains form the basis of an essentially creative process of recollection as 'recording through writing'.

They [fill] the otherwise empty and memoryless periphery of this "me" with meaning and continuity . . . From all these bits and pieces I have built myself a Karl Ove, an Yngve, a mom and dad, a house in Hove and a house in Tybakken, a grandmother and grandfather on my dad's side, and a grandmother and grandfather on

130 Both Barthes in *Camera Lucida* and Knausgård in *Boyhood Island*, moreover, begin their photographic self-investigations with an analysis of a picture of their mothers. Both initially struggle to find the mother's unique essence or identity in these pictures. As Knausgård ponders: "Yes, that was my mother, my very own mom, but who was she? What was she thinking? How did she see her life, the one she had lived so far and the one awaiting her? Only she knows, and the photo tells you nothing" (2014: 9). Barthes, while rummaging through his mother's photographs after her death, at first has the same experience: "none seemed to me really "right": neither as a photographic performance nor as a living resurrection of the beloved face. If I were ever to show them to friends I could doubt that these photographs would *speak*" (64). Unlike Knausgård, he eventually discovers the image that captures "the truth of the face I had loved."; the "*impossible science of the unique being*" (67; 71). Significantly, this is the only picture he writes about that he did not include in the book, since it could never convey this punctum to the reader: "at most it would interest your *studium*: period, clothes, photogeny; but in it, for you, no wound" (73).

my mom's side, a neighborhood and a multitude of kids.
(2014: 9)

Thus Knausgård emphasizes the creativity of the act of archiving the self. It is an active process of construction, a 'piecing together' of remnants from the past and filling the voids between them with stories, rather than the possession of an unchanging mental storehouse of fixed and readily retrievable ('Googlizable') memories.

In its considerations of the mutability of memories as they are continuously reconstructed in singular, creative acts of recollection, *My Struggle* denounces the understanding of memory that underlies digital technologies of memory externalization such as MyLifeBits. Data's dream of 'total recall' disregards the fact that memories are dynamic rather than static, and that recollection is an ongoing and changeable process in which memories are configured anew each time (see Rigney 2008; Van Dijck 2007). Memory works *in the present* rather than as an immutable, storable trace of the past.¹³¹ To underscore this mutability, Knausgård's narrator perceives his past self as different from his writing self. The person doing the recollecting changes over time: for instance, the twenty-five year old Karl Ove looks back on his twenty-year-old self with embarrassment, but this is not necessarily true for the forty-year-old writer. The meaning of the past changes along with the 'I'. Gaps and absences between these past selves are not mere imperfections of memory, or 'bugs' to overcome. These gaps become meaningful in this process, as Ann Rigney writes: "[t]he partiality of remembrance . . . is not merely a shortcoming but also one of the preconditions of its being meaningful (2005: 18). It is precisely this meaning attached to the past that is lost in attempts to fix and objectify memories for total recall.

Thus, despite the sheer amount of past in *My Struggle*, Knausgård does not subscribe to this illusion of objective 'retrievability'. He can insist on forgetfulness even while writing a monumental autobiography, because he envisions recollection as a creative process in the present:

Memory is not a reliable quantity in life. . . . memory doesn't prioritize the truth. It is never the demand for truth that determines whether memory recalls an action accurately or not. It is self-interest that does. Memory is pragmatic, it is sly and artful, but not in any hostile or malicious way; on the contrary, it does everything it can

131 For this reason, Rigney helpfully suggests that 'recollection' or 'remembrance' are more appropriate terms than 'memory,' since they already suggests the performance-character of this process as an activity taking place in the here and now (2005: 17). Whereas Rigney focuses on cultural or collective memory, I believe her insights, like Assmann's, are well applicable to personal memory.

to keep its host satisfied. Something pushes a memory into the great void of oblivion, something distorts it beyond recognition, something misunderstands it totally, something, and this something is as good as nothing, recalls it with sharpness, clarity, and accuracy. That which is remembered accurately is never given to you to determine. (2014: 10)

This passage is a lucid description of Knausgård's approach to writing personal memories as a dialectic of remembrance and forgetting that re-imagines archiving the self as a creative act.

Unlike the more conventional life-story that begins at birth and ends with death, this creative archival act, of dragging memories out of the dark and recombining the fragments of narrative they inspire, knows no logical endpoint. It is a linear, yet interminable process of creation. Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, was still looking for a unique essence, even if he questioned its existence—hence the metaphor of 'punctum' as a point of puncture, conveying the 'real' self as lying deeper. "I could not express this accord except by an infinite set of adjectives" (70), he writes of the associations the punctum triggers in him. Conversely, Knausgård *does* opt for such an infinite series of associations, of (self-)descriptions and (non-)narrative fragments rather than an essence or punctum. In this respect he is closer to van Royen and Lee in presenting the self as serial and open-ended. In the next section I analyze this serial self-understanding and investigate how it ties in with *My Struggle's* quantitative strategies of representation. I situate this strategy in a larger development in the current media-scape, which I refer to as an aesthetic of scale and seriality.

3.3 Chronicler of the Facebook Era: Quantification and Seriality

I have outlined how Knausgård's larger project is framed by archival rather than narrative structures, but I have yet to analyze more closely the quantitative aspects of his writing *within* this archival frame. In order to do so, the present section focuses on *My Struggle's* quantitative and serial strategies of representation. More precisely, I argue that this series takes part in the current aesthetics of size and seriality that is increasingly pervasive under the influence of big data, social networking websites, and trends such as the 'Quantified Self' ('QS') movement. Both *My Struggle's* serial form and its quantitative strategies of representation rehearse older forms such as the nineteenth-century serialized novel and the medieval chronicle. These forms become newly relevant for the monumental novel in a dialectic with digital media and datafication.

After I address seriality in *My Struggle*, I focus on its use of the anaphoric singulative frequency. Last, I consider Knausgård's quantitative style

of recording and his incorporation of lists. I demonstrate how, under the (unacknowledged) influence of digital media, Knausgård's work employs a quantitative mode of narrating-as-counting in which causality and closure make way for seriality and open-endedness. The quantitative mode of representation that *My Struggle* employs effectuates a renewal of archaic forms of accounting in a dialogue with new media practices.

3.3.1 Serial aesthetics and the serial self

In the last section I wrote about contemporary practices of 'archiving the self' through new media, such as daily self-photography and time-lapse video. Yet one element in these examples has hitherto remained unexplored: the emphasis on size, scale, and seriality that is central to activities such as taking a selfie or posting a blog every single day and accumulating all these self-representations, instead of making a small selection of 'representative' photographs.

The prevalent emphasis on scale in online self-representations and in the monumental novel is directly related to technologies of data support. One logical explanation for the current urge to amass and quantify self-representations is offered by the technical advances of digitalization, such as an expansion of storage space and the possibility of erasure.¹³² Earlier technological limitations forced us to be selective, to sample and curate. With increasing possibilities of recording and archiving 'everything' (unlimited e-mail and text messages, photos, and videos), the quantification of records becomes a logical preoccupation. As big data theorists believe, "the need for sampling is an artifact of a period of information scarcity, a product of the natural constraints on interacting with information in an analog era" (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013: 16-7). Selection, they claim, is now a thing of the past. These technological possibilities in turn inform certain aesthetic preferences.

This aesthetics of seriality is exemplified by the practice of the daily selfie mentioned earlier.¹³³ A sequence of selfies is essentially another

132 Take digital photography as an example. Earlier, when we had to buy film for a camera and pay to have it developed, and when we could not erase a picture once taken, a certain economy was implied in considering the expense of each photograph we chose to take and develop. Moreover, we had to keep track of the number of shots left on the roll, so as not to run out of film and then stumble upon an interesting image. Another example is the act of carefully selecting some particularly meaningful songs to put on a mix tape, instead of almost instantly downloading and storing more gigabytes of music than one can even find the time to listen to. Today, digital cameras encourage us to take more pictures through the availability of abundant storage space; individual photos are costless, memory space vast, and processes of selection can be put off until later. A logical next step in this technological evolution has already presented itself in the form of automatic cameras like the 'Narrative Clip' I mentioned above. (See <<http://getnarrative.com>>)

133 For an interesting source on the phenomenon of digital self-photography, see the website of the 'Selficity' project, an innovative multidisciplinary research into the

example of Eco's "visual list" (2009), an over-abundance that seems to continue beyond the frame of the picture. Yet, the paintings by Giuseppe Arcimboldo I referred to in chapter two as examples of such visual lists were constructed as *omnia in omnibus*, or many things compressed in one picture. The daily selfie, on the other hand (even when presented as a time-lapse video and thus given the illusion of an uninterrupted continuity), puts many elements after another in a linear fashion. Hence, this practice of digital self-representation is akin to the interminable succession of smaller narratives in the monumental novel (1+1+1, et cetera). Open-endedness and linear, temporal order are the defining elements of seriality. Rather than being centered on the individual pictures of which they consist, such serial self-portraits rely on quantity and rhythm for their effect—an effect I indicated earlier in my analysis of Bolaño's 'database' of murder victims. We also find this aesthetic of seriality in blog posts, automated diaries, and other forms of online representation. Rettberg explains that the cumulative logic of the serial is built into today's software and into our habits of reading and sharing online:

we always crave the next post, the next image, the next bit of the story. The very act of starting a blog or an Instagram or Facebook account carries with it an intention to write or share more, again, another day. (2014: 46)

Social media have embedded the principle of addition and accumulation in their software.

These modes of representation also influence art forms and media that are not directly dependent on technological possibilities of storage space and erasure, such as literature and television. The serial is increasingly central to our contemporary media ecology (Denson and Jahn-Sudmann 2014; Denson 2011). This popularity of the serial in literature and television is to be understood as a 'comeback' since, like practices of archiving the self, serial media (such as newspapers, novels, photography, and radio) by far predate the digital age (see Anderson 1991; Sartre 1991 [1960]). In the nineteenth century, industrialized print production provided a mass readership with access to cheap books. Serial publication strategies supported the logic and rhythms of an industrialized literary marketplace and drove the demand of consumers (Allen and Van den Berg 2013: 3-4; Mussell 2012). For a long time, serials were considered cheap, mass-

demographics of the selfie that combines theoretic, artistic, and quantitative methods. The researchers of Selfiecity compile thousands of selfies from five different cities and use media visualizations to lay bare patterns in this body. The 'selfiexploratory' section allows the user to navigate the whole dataset of 3200 photos. See <<http://selfiecity.net/>>

produced media, and associated with 'low' culture, such as comics, soap operas, and genre fiction (Hayward 1997). In the twenty-first century, under the influence of digital media, the serial has become relevant again, both as a popular and esteemed cultural form, and as a central topic in the theoretical study of literature and media. Cases in point are the rise of sophisticated forms like narratively complex TV series (Mittell 2006), the new-found prestige of the graphic novel (Baetens and Frey 2014), and the renewed literariness of the serialized novel (e.g. Danielewski's experimental 27-volume novel series *The Familiar*).

The serial form entails certain possibilities for autobiographical writing compared to single-volume autobiography. For instance, it logically complicates the attempt to present the self as a definitive whole. In Leigh Gilmore's words, seriality "rais[es] the spectre of endless autobiography" (2001: 96). As Nicole Stamant writes in *Serial Memoir: Archiving American Lives* (2014), the serial form does not claim to transmit a unique identity or 'interiority,' but privileges the ex-centric (6). It is especially suited to autobiography after Lyotard's end of meta-narratives, since it lends itself to an abundance of smaller, fragmented stories instead of an overarching narrative structure that binds subject and memories in Aristotelean unity. The interplay of repetition and variation at the structural core of serial narration (Eco 1985; 1990) leads to performative and cumulative self-presentations that emphasize how self-image changes over time, sometimes even from one moment to the next.

This is the case in *My Struggle*. Knausgård chose to write six autobiographical novels instead of just one and he structured these volumes loosely according to the different roles he plays in life, such as father (book 2), son (book 1 and 3), lover (book 2) and writer (book 5). But these categories are far from exclusive in their demarcation. Indeed, their contents constantly spill over into one another. How could anyone ever completely separate these roles? Knausgård's capacity as a father of three is inextricably connected to his own upbringing in the shadow of an oppressive father (if only because of his efforts not to resemble this father). By the same token, his vocation as a writer influences his family life (if only because this preoccupation often causes him to be absent from family obligations). As a sequence of repetitions and variations, *My Struggle's* serial form is able to capture these conflicting and overlapping roles of the 'self' in a manner that would not be feasible for the single-volume autobiography.

The serial form also allows Knausgård to emphasize the discontinuities in his sense of self over time. The narrator's self-understanding is episodic rather than narrative or diachronic. I already mentioned his insistence on gaps and absences in relating his memories. This incompleteness stems from the trouble he has with perceiving the 'I' as a continuous presence with its own personal history. Knausgård is unable to identify with his earlier 'selves':

It is absolutely impossible to identify with the infant my parents photographed, indeed so impossible that it seems wrong to use the word “me” to describe what is lying on the changing table . . . Is this creature the same person as the one sitting here in Malmö writing? And will the forty-year-old creature who is sitting in Malmö writing this one overcast September day in a room filled with the drone of the traffic outside and the autumn wind howling through the old-fashioned ventilation system be the same as the gray, hunched geriatric who in forty years from now might be sitting dribbling and trembling in an old people’s home somewhere in the Swedish woods? Not to mention the corpse that at some point will be laid out on a bench in a morgue? Still known as Karl Ove. (2014: 6-7)

The problem of identifying with past and future selves recalls Strawson’s distinction between ‘episodics’ and ‘diachronics’ that I have previously discussed in reference to 2666’s Amalfitano. Knausgård’s reaction to photos of himself foregrounds such a lack of a diachronic or ‘narrative’ sense of self. He misses the continuity of a subjectivity that was there in the past, is still the same person in the present, and will be there in the future. This makes Knausgård, like Amalfitano, what Strawson calls an ‘episodic,’ a person that conceives of his life as a series of discrete events, and himself as different people at the time of each event (2004: 430). The repeated occurrence of episodic personalities in these monumental works indicates a shift in self-understanding that coincides with the shift in representation from the dominance of narrative to that of the database. We could very well be witnessing a gradual transformation in self-representation and memory writing under influence of digitalization, from the narrative or diachronic to the episodic or serial. At the very least, possible alternatives are opening up to stories as a primary way of presenting human lives.

Knausgård expresses his episodic personality when he critiques the convention of assigning one name that supposedly refers to a coherent and stable identity across a lifetime. This fixed name is in discord with the rupture that the author experiences between earlier episodes in his life and the present (a rupture that is reinforced by his habits of destroying memory objects when a period of his life has ended). Why, he asks, do we not choose different names for different phases?

[I]sn’t it actually unbelievable that one simple name encompasses all of this? The fetus in the belly, the infant on the changing table, the forty-year-old in front of the computer, the old man in the chair, the corpse on the

bench? Wouldn't it be more natural to operate with several names since their identities and self-perceptions are so very different? Such that the fetus might be called Jens Ove, for example, and the infant Nils Ove, and the five- to ten-year-old Per Ove, the ten- to twelve-year-old Geir Ove, the twelve- to seventeen-year-old Kurt Ove, the seventeen- to twenty-three-year-old John Ove, the twenty-three- to thirty-two-year-old Tor Ove, the thirty-two- to forty-six-year-old Karl Ove - and so on and so forth? (2014: 7)

In his understanding of these earlier selves as others, Knausgård engages with an age-old conflation between identity and unity of recollection. Underlying these observations is Locke's (post-Cartesian) distinction, in his *Essay on Human Understanding*, between 'man' as a physical unity, and personhood or individual identity:

as far as any intelligent being can repeat the idea of any past action with the same consciousness it had of it at first, and with the same consciousness it has of any present action; so far it is the same personal self. For it is by the consciousness it has of its present thoughts and actions, that it is self to itself now, and so will be the same self, as far as the same consciousness can extend to actions past or to come. (Locke 1991: II: xxvii: 10)

There may, in this conception, be more than one person in the same man, if they are conditioned by different streams of consciousness that cannot be integrated.

Knausgård, by adopting this take on identity and memory, goes against the fixed continuity of self that the research of 'universal memory machines' too readily assumed. Instead, *My Struggle* gestures in the direction of an understanding of the self as serial. Like the daily selfie, the series here promotes a sequence of representations of the self, rather than an integrated identity as a storehouse of memories, where they would remain fixed over time. As Sterne wrote in one of his *Sermons*,¹³⁴ "in the same day, sometimes in the very same action, [men] are utterly inconsistent and irreconcilable with themselves" (1819: XI: 143). This 'serial self' is a mode of self-understanding that is currently re-emerging as narrative cedes ground to the digital archive as the primary means by which we structure our memories. In addition to the influence of this serial aesthetic, autobiography is also transformed by the author's

134 Sterne was thoroughly inspired by Locke's philosophy; for an in-depth study of this relation of influence, see Moglen 1975.

use of the anaphoric singulative frequency, which, I will now put forth, emulates the 'paradigmatic' ordering system of the database rather than (narrative) selection and compression.

3.3.2 The anaphoric singulative: a database of girlfriends

Despite the oft-made comparison between Knausgård and Proust, it is their dissimilarities that best illuminate the specific nature of *My Struggle's* monumentality. An important difference lies in the modes of frequency they employ. As discussed earlier in regards to Genette's narrative theory, frequency is the category that concerns the relation between the number of times an event occurs in the story and the number of times it is mentioned in the text of the narrative (1980: 144).

Proust's narration is characterized by a high degree of habit. In order to express repeated occurrences, he often employs what Genette calls the iterative: what happens on numerous occasions in the story, is mentioned in the text only once (114). The first sentence of *Swann's Way*, for example, goes "For a long time I would go to bed early" (Proust 2003: 26). Conventionally, a story would start out this way, to then go over into the singulative (one mention per occurrence) when the action commences. In Proust's work, however, the iterative is maintained throughout (Genette 31). The effect of this mode of frequency is compression. As Genette explains, "a single narrative assertion covers . . . several analogical events considered only with respect to what they have in common" (*Ibid.*).¹³⁵ In *Time Regained*, Proust's narrator makes a case for this compression. Even an autobiographical novel is

at the very least put together out of several intercalated episodes in the life of the author – earlier episodes which have inspired the work and later ones which resemble it just as much, the later loves being traced after the pattern of the earlier. For to the woman whom we have loved most in our life we are not so faithful as we are to ourself [sic], and sooner or later we forget her in order – since this is one of the characteristics of that self – to be able to begin to love again. (1993: 317)

Proust's narrator justifies narrative selection and synthesis by appealing to the workings of recollection over time. In order to love (and live) again, it is imperative that we forget, or at least that our memories lose some of their sharpness. A Proustian account of a love affair might therefore

135 It has to be noted that Proust's incessant use of the iterative is not exactly the purest employment of this mode of frequency, since often, the narration is so detailed and specific in its inclusion of dialogues and thoughts that the narrator could not possibly have experienced the remembered passage precisely like that over and over.

refer to several women or men at once.¹³⁶ Hence the iterative mode of frequency that Proust employs is a typical case of what Manovich calls 'syntagmatic' narrativity, since each subsequent element is the outcome of an act of selection from an implicit and invisible paradigm.

Knausgård, on the other hand, deviates from narrative convention by repeatedly employing the less common anaphoric singulative mode. Earlier, I identified this subtype of the singulative frequency in the way Bolaño's narrator 'listed' the 110 crimes, one after the other. In the anaphoric singulative mode, what happened n times (n being >1) is narrated n times (nN / nS); each mention in the text corresponds to one occurrence in the story.¹³⁷ This subtype is not commonly used since it obviously amounts to an inefficient way of storytelling: narrating *without compression*.

The anaphoric singulative goes a long way in accounting for the extraordinary volume of the *My Struggle* series. Thus in *Boyhood Island* (2014), the author has included stories of *all* the girls he ever fell in love with as a boy. We read how he first admires the girl from a distance, then makes a third party ask her to go with him. He then takes his time to recount the joy he felt when she says yes, followed by insecurity because he does not know what to do with her. After a couple of days, she breaks up with him and the reader is witness to the dramatic heartbreak this causes. Then the whole sequence is repeated with another girl.¹³⁸

Whereas Proust stated that for us to go on with our lives, it is imperative that our memories lose some of their distinction, Knausgård mourns and tries to counteract this fading. Unlike Proust, the author refuses to choose only the most important objects of his affection, to compress or amalgamate the girls' characteristics into one character, as a

136 The principle of compression and amalgamation that is central to the iterative is close to the Freudian notion of transference, the projection of unconscious feelings about a person onto another person, which leads one to unconsciously let a past relationship shape a present one. (See Laplanche and Pontalis 1983: 349-56).

137 Besides the anaphoric singulative, the *My Struggle* novels also repeatedly use the repetitive mode of frequency (Genette 31), where what happens once is narrated repeatedly. As noted, several of Knausgård's memories reoccur in different contexts and in different volumes. And then there are memories that reoccur for the reason that characters, such as the narrator's grandmother, repeatedly bring them up (e.g. "I also know that Yngve went around ringing doorbells and asking if there were any children living there. Grandma always used to tell that story. (2014: 6). Even though this statement in itself is iterative, the several recurring mentions of grandma telling this story belong to the anaphoric singulative, since an event corresponds to each mention. As a form of narration based on repetition-with-variation, the anaphoric singulative is a form of intra- (within one volume) and intertextual (between volumes) seriality.

138 Likewise, in the fifth book, about Knausgård's twenties in Bergen, all his memories of adultery get the same narrative treatment in a sequence of drunkenness, fear of being caught, regret, and feelings of being unworthy (then getting drunk and repeating the cycle).

pars pro toto. Bound to take every minor episode of his life exceptionally seriously, he wants to preserve them all. If we must compare him to Proust, then Knausgård is Proust for the Facebook generation, who does not need to choose between hundreds of 'friends'. Although he does not believe in the possibility of 'total recall' and presents his memories as changeable and constructed in the present, his compulsion in these passages to retrieve and preserve 'everything' gestures in the direction of an 'N=all' of memory. This makes his writing the equivalent of sharing 'Too Much Information' on social media, 'instagramming' pictures of every meal, 'twittering' personal details, or posting overly revealing selfies. We have seen that Knausgård, as an 'episodic' personality, starts his volumes with emphasizing the importance of forgetting and absence. But then he brings his 'archival' memory to the surface through writing, and this catalyzes a sprawling, unstoppable narrativity. *My Struggle* is characterized by a constant tension between permanence and fragments, erasure and overabundance.

Knausgård's inclusive approach aligns narrativity with the 'paradigmatic' ordering system of the database, where a whole range of possible choices is presented.¹³⁹ Like Bolaño's "The Part About the Crimes," *My Struggle* lacks a (recognizable) plot because narrativity is dispersed and fragmented. The syntagm or narrative is secondary and implicit: if something resembling a plot emerges, it occurs when the reader, as the living equivalent of an algorithm, searches for patterns and meaningful connections in the mass of details. We must therefore accept the absence of a causal grand narrative to Knausgård's autobiographical recollections. The author leaves it to the reader to distinguish between the meaningful and meaningless. The result is a non-hierarchical ordering of memorial material that is reinforced by the last aspects of the aesthetics of scale that I address below: the use of quantifying strategies of representation and the inclusion of lists and enumerations.

3.3.3 Counting and listing

Besides serial aesthetics and the anaphoric inclusivity of the database, I consider now how Knausgård's novels fit within the context of yet another recent development in media, namely self-representation by numbers.

139 Of course, selection is inevitable, and we know for a fact that Knausgård has 'curated' his memories at least somewhat before publishing, even if only for legal reasons. At least one relative has been erased from the novels upon request. Would we be reading his autobiographical series for 'what really happened,' these selections would make Knausgård an unreliable narrator by default. As mentioned earlier, he recurrently insists that he has almost no memories of a certain period, to then go on relating them in fullest detail for hundreds of pages on end. This, too, points in the direction of fictionalization. The point that I want to raise here, however, is that compared to more traditional modes of narration, the representational strategies of monumental novels like *My Struggle* reveal their affinity with the inclusive, paradigmatic ordering of the database.

Trends like the Quantified Self, numerical narrative, and datafication all inspire an attention to quantification that informs contemporary autobiographical writing as a way of recording or chronicling. This last subsection signals a return to pre-narrative modes of presenting the self and the everyday in the form of statistical approaches and listing.

Self-representation by numbers is a popular activity in social media and self-tracking. This is in line with Ernst's claim, mentioned earlier, that accounting comes back to its etymological origin of counting in the digital age.¹⁴⁰ Consider for instance computer scientist Nicholas Felton's ongoing life project *Annual Reports*. Since 2005, Felton has been recording everyday events of his life, confining himself in this process to statistical information. He keeps score of how often he uses public transportation, visits a museum, attends a birthday party, how many hours he spends at the gym, how many books and pages he reads and how many beers he drinks. He calls these records *numerical narratives* (Felton 2011). A similar hybridization between counting and recounting, I will shortly argue, informs Knausgård's mode of representation as a reporting of the self.

Yet, the ultimate contemporary manifestation of the importance of numbers in (self-)representation is the aforementioned QS-movement. Aided by wearable computing technology, spreadsheets, statistical tools, and visualization software, 'self-trackers' use technology to acquire, store, and analyze their own life—qua data. They create meticulous records of weight, heart rate, blood pressure, hours of sleep, food intake, exercise, location, and even mood, alertness, overall well-being, and other seemingly non-quantifiable psychological states like happiness. Whereas QS seems a rather extreme example of the extent to which one can incorporate statistics into one's self-understanding, a renewed valuation of numerical representations underlies more common technologies and media as well. In "The Compelling Charm of Numbers: Writing For and Thru the Network of Data" (2012), Roberto Simanowski compares Facebook's Timeline, which lists events without explanation or causal connections, to medieval annals. In a menu at the right-hand side of a Facebook page, the Timeline feature comprises a list of years, months and days, coupled to all activities undertaken in these intervals: status entries, friends' comments, uploaded photographs and videos, as well as other web pages visited. Interpretation here is replaced by (would-be) 'raw' data, as Simanowski states: "the historiographic concept returns from story to insulated events, from proper history to annals" (23).

140 The first writing was developed not to record words and sentences but to keep accounts. The evolution of script in Mesopotamia provided a precise method of keeping track of production and business transactions. Written language enabled early civilizations to measure reality, record it, and later retrieve it. Together, measuring and recording facilitated the creation of data. They are the earliest foundations of datafication. (Aiden and Michel 2013: 12)

This renewed centrality of pre-narrative forms of historiography is also evidenced by the structuring of *My Struggle*. As in the medieval chronicles and annals, the novel does not apply a clear hierarchy to what it 'records'. The events within one passage are often placed in serial or paratactic relations instead of being causally connected. Put in a sequential order, everyday trivialities, personal milestones like the birth of the author's children, and historical events are all put on the same level. One such series, for instance, comprises the events of two months in a few lines: the release of the debut single of Supergrass; his drunken attendance of a concert; all the clothes, records, and books bought in two months' time, his goings-about on a trip to London, and his successful wedding proposal to his girlfriend (2014a: 546). In contrast with the usual emphasis accorded to marriage in the narration of one's life, the last event presented in this list recedes and becomes one element in a chain of unrelated occurrences.

Besides being non-hierarchical, enumerations like these affect the scope of autobiography because they transcend the individual focus and transmit a broader picture of the times. The author does not only report the events of his own life, but also of the contemporary culture that surrounds him (like Fuller did with his *Chronofile*): "808 State released 808:88:98, the Pixies *Doolittle*, Neneh Cherry *Raw Like Sushi*, The Golden Palominos *A Dead Horse*, Raga Rockers *Blaff*. People started purchasing their own computers" (2014a: 299). These paratactic constructions lack causality: the purchase of computers is by no means caused by the new release of Raga Rockers. The reports present an open-ended and potentially endless notation of time. Sequences like these simply enumerate actions ('I did this, then that'), chronicling the events of Knausgård's life without asking why they occurred. The emphasis is not on a narrative unity of experience and causality, but on a cumulative effect of disparate data.

A last device needs to be mentioned in this respect, as the inclusion of lists and enumerations in the novels furthers this effect of infinity. These lists and enumerations are instances of 'intra-textual seriality' (seriality within one volume, Eco 1990: 92). Knausgård makes lists of the objects in his mother's house that have been there since his childhood (2013: 312); all the people living in his street when he was a kid, including names and occupations, as well as their children's names (2014: 15-6); all his schoolmates, hierarchically organized into who excelled at certain activities (*Ibid.* 174); all the books he read as a kid (2014: 304-306); and all the girls in his class, categorized by characteristics he remembers. Conventionally, we recognize a list on the basis of the formal features that are applied to a sequential presentation of items. In Knausgård's lists, there is no such formal patterning. Instead, we recognize them by a repeated syntactical function: "There was... And there was ... Then there was ..." (2012: 40). Contained within a block of linear text, these

collections of formally diverse items impart the reader with a sense of the list's potential infinity. Listing replaces narration with a presentation of similar elements according to number.

Taken together, the strategies of listing, the anaphoric singulative, and paratactic seriality that I have analyzed in this section amount to a mode of representation that incorporates the characteristic open-endedness and inclusiveness of the database into the book-bound monumental novel. My analysis of *My Struggle* so far has brought into view an emergent aesthetic of seriality and quantification that is (unknowingly) influenced by digital media. Moreover, I have outlined the possible transformations of self-understanding from diachronic to episodic, which can be expected to further inform modes of self-expression and representational practices in the future. Knausgård's conception of 'recording' the self generates an effect of quantity and rhythm in his writing that is similar to digital media's modes of self-representation. At the same time, his novels remind us that not all is new in the present: the shift towards quantitative representation also marks a return to pre-narrative modes of recording.

The points of analysis that I have treated so far firmly embed Knausgård's writing in the present media landscape from which he programmatically seeks to turn away. The cross-medial aesthetic of size and scale that I have begun to map points to a more complex relation between prose literature and new media. This relation of influence, rather than resistance or opposition, undermines Knausgård's claim to turn his back on the present, media-infused world. Having addressed these transformations in writing the self and the everyday in a digital age, I have answered the first part of the question I posed at the beginning of this chapter, as to the relation of the monumental autobiography to the new possibilities for self-(re)presentation offered by tracking, quantifying strategies, and social media.

There are, however, also important media-specific differences left for me to consider. In the last section of this chapter, I analyze these aspects which set Knausgård's writing apart in the current media-scape. What does the form of the novel add to this prevalent aesthetics of size, scale, seriality, and quantity? How does *My Struggle* emphasize the medium-specific properties of the prose novel?

3.4 Slow Reading and Wasted Time: Resistance in Monumental Writing

In this concluding section I first address critiques of big data's ideology marked by positivism, apparent transparency, and instantaneity (Columbia 2009; Chun 2011; Gitelman 2013; Van Dijck 2014). Not only is the scale on which we can map and analyze phenomena larger than

ever before: underlying the 'N=all' approach of mapping and charting 'everything' is a newfound and problematic belief in the objective power of numbers to correspond to reality (e.g. Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013: 49). I propose that *My Struggle* embodies a resistance to this perceived immediacy and simultaneity in its form, through a foregrounding of *mediacy* as opposed to the transparency of data, and of *delay* as opposed to simultaneity of recording online.

3.4.1 'Let the numbers speak for themselves': the positivism of datafication

*When all dimensions that affect the reality effect – detail,
tone, colour, shape, movement – are quantified, reality itself
can be related to a set of numbers.*

– Manovich, "Global Algorithm 1.3:
The Aesthetics of Virtual Worlds"¹⁴¹

As noted before, big data devotees encourage us to simply "let the numbers speak for themselves" (Anderson 2008: n.p.). I first discuss here the negative side-effects of this increasing influence of numerical data. A gradual decrease of the influence of narrative as a model for the world, I argue, goes hand in hand with a tendency towards positivism. The end of the 'grand narratives' (Lyotard 1984), accounts that strive to make sense of the whole world in one conclusive account, is generally heralded as a positive, emancipating development. However, the downsides that Lyotard described are less often referenced. In the wake of the grand narratives and under the influence of computerized society, he warned, truth value would be replaced by input/output matrices whose legitimization is solely based on their optimization of the system's performance (xxiv). This so-called technological 'operativity criterion' that works according to a logic of maximum performance would henceforth stand in the place of narrative as a way of making sense of the world. In a 'datafied' society, this prediction has come true.

After the waning influence of grand narratives, as we know, narrativity *tout court* has been allocated a decisively more modest role as a representational mode (Manovich 2001; Van Alphen 2014). 'Post-hermeneutic' media theorists like Ernst (2013) and Kittler (1990) have expressed unease with narrative as a medium for processing knowledge of the past – or, as Ernst calls it, "[t]he cultural burden of giving sense to data through narrative structures" (Lovink 2003). The increasing importance of the form of the database should be understood as part of a larger tendency to attempt to surpass narrative to enter into direct

141 (1996: n.pag.)

contact with 'the thing itself,' and hence bypass signification. This development includes: White's (1980) work on pre-narrative forms of historiography; the notion of the 'individual thing' in historiography (the fact before its use within any narrative, see Ankersmit 1983: 172); and the recent philosophical currents of 'speculative realism' and 'object-oriented philosophy'.¹⁴² These groups of thinkers strive to gain access to the *Ding an sich*, emancipated from what Quentin Meillassoux (2008) calls 'correlationism,' the philosophical tradition since Kant that holds that objects only exist in relation to human perception.

This positivism has become widespread with the rise of 'datafication,' the transmission of all kinds of phenomena to a quantified format, allowing for real-time tracking and predictive analysis of social behavior.¹⁴³ Datafication is increasingly used as a legitimate means to access, understand, and monitor human behavior: it is expected to "enable the creation of new scopes that make it possible for our society to more effectively probe its own nature" (Aiden and Michel 2013: 12).¹⁴⁴ Big data advocates embrace factuality, believing that through data (which in Latin means 'given,' in the sense of 'fact') something 'real' can be transmitted.¹⁴⁵ As a vast collection of measuring points,

142 'Object-oriented philosophy' (see Bogost 2008; Bryant 2011) opposes what its practitioners see as the anthropocentrism of Kant's Copernican Revolution, which holds that objects conform to the mind of the subject and become products of human cognition (Bryant 2010). Against this view, they propose that objects are not ontologically "exhausted" by their relations with human subjects, but exist independently of human perception and cognition (Harman 2002: 16). Object-oriented philosophy is a division of 'speculative realism,' the contemporary school of thought that criticizes the post-Kantian reduction of philosophical analysis to a connection between thought and being and which renders the reality of anything that lies outside this correlation is unknowable (Bryant et al. 2011: 8).

143 One example of such practices of prediction is the adaptation of books to what readers want to read. Features like underscoring lines while reading on an e-reader and charting the amount of time spent on each page, allow the producers of these technologies to store information about our collective reading habits. What passages are often skipped, what sections or sentences compel our attention? This information goes directly to companies like Amazon. Thus, we now know that it takes the average reader seven hours to finish the last volume of *The Hunger Games*, that the three volumes of *Fifty Shades of Grey* are read back-to-back, as one volume, and that nonfiction is mostly read in smaller chunks while fantasy novels are finished in one continuous sitting (Fortuin 2012). Publishers use this information to adapt their books to our reading habits.

144 With respect to big data and data visualization, too, scholars have signaled a widespread belief that they "offer a higher form of intelligence and knowledge that can generate insights that were previously impossible, with the aura of truth, objectivity, and accuracy" (boyd and Crawford 2012: 663).

145 That is why Tyler Butler Reigeluth prefers the term digital traces (*traces numériques*) over data to describe the tracks we leave behind when using digital media. A trace, she explains, "corresponds to some minute detail or seemingly insignificant fragment such as the chemist's residue, the detective's clue, the historian's indices, or the psychoanalyst's

they perceive data as independent of representation and the subjective human perspective. Data are taken to refer directly to reality, to offer an immediacy that had previously been ascribed to photography (Barthes 1981: 5-6). Such a conflation is reflected in terms like “data shadow” (McFedries 2013) and “data double” (Haggerty and Ericson 2000).

The extreme belief in the objective power of numerical values is best observed and understood in the practice of self-tracking. The aforementioned ‘Quantified Self’-movement, which engages in tracking, recording, and quantifying all possible data regarding the self, puts human lives under the “macroscope” (McFedries 2013). QS does not do this for its own sake: its goal, as the slogan of the movement tells, is *self-knowledge through numbers* (see quantifiedself.com). Behind its practices is a dream of statistics as a path to total, positive (self-)knowledge (see McCosker and Wilken 2014). The numbers, self-trackers believe, tell the objective truth, knowledge of which should lead to self-improvement—as is evident from the names of apps like OptimizeMe. At meetings, members share their stories about how self-tracking has improved their lives, made them more productive, helped them control diseases, lose weight, sleep better, and find love. In short, the movement believes that technological applications can help us become better, healthier versions of ourselves.

This newfound belief in the direct correspondence of numerical data to reality is reinforced by contemporary media’s emphasis on ‘real time’ and instantaneity (Hoskins 2011). Modern-day communication technologies enable an immediacy of communication, which promises

no more delay between memory and the present, but the technical option of immediate feedback, turning every present data into archival entries and vice versa. The economy of timing becomes a short-circuit” (Ernst, qtd. in Lovink 2003).¹⁴⁶

As Vaidhyanathan sums it up, “[t]otal recall renders context, time, and distance irrelevant” (2011: 178). As an effect, the difference between the ‘I’ that experiences and the ‘I’ that reports the experience is annihilated. ‘Real-time’ media like blogs, Instagram, and Facebook answer to a “new

symbol” (2014: 249). This notion allows for more ambiguity and subjectivity than ‘data’: we do not take the traces of a human being (such as a graphic of their heart rate or sleeping pattern) for the person herself.

146 Sherry Turkle, in this respect, has identified the rise of live tweeting and other forms of synchronous self-representation as a new spatiotemporal simultaneity of living between the virtual and the physical (2011: 161). Due to this double temporality, the software holds a promise of eternity (even when it is threatened with obsolescence); it creates what Wendy Hui Kyong Chun has called an “enduring ephemeral” (2011: 137).

imperative of authenticity and radical transparency” (Simanowski 2012: 24). Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have coined the term ‘immediacy’ for these tendencies to perceive the medium as transparent or self-erasing (1999: 21).¹⁴⁷ Experiencing immediacy, a user is not fully aware of confronting a medium, but instead seems to be standing in an immediate relationship to its contents.

Not all scholars are entirely convinced about these prospects. In an article titled “Explosions of Information, Implosions of Meaning, and the Release of Affects” (2013), Van Alphen writes how during the 1970s and 1980s, the increase in the accessibility of information was seen as a precondition for meaning production. But in fact, he claims, this project has failed since it has turned against itself: “[t]he explosion of information has not led to more meaning and better understanding, but rather to an implosion of meaning as such” (220). Since ongoing technological improvements in datafication allow for an unprecedented increase in access to information (coupled to a rationalist belief that access is all we need), this trend in the devaluation of meaning is expected to perpetuate itself.

Moreover, scholars have raised questions concerning the positivist philosophy of a data-centered society. Van Dijck, in her article “Datafication, Dataism and Dataveillance: Big Data between Scientific Paradigm and Ideology” (2014), deconstructs the ideology of datafication. ‘Dataism,’ as she calls this ideology, entails “a widespread *belief* in the objective quantification and potential tracking of all kinds of human behavior and sociality through online media technologies” (198; see also Golumbia 2009). She raises caution against the misguided idea that humans can be understood by quantitative means. Dataism, she foresees, is fast becoming “a belief in a new gold standard of knowledge about human behavior” (201).¹⁴⁸ Drucker, too, critiques this collapse in the difference between observation and observed phenomena. Erasing this distinction makes datafied phenomena appear “observer-independent,” thus doing away with “the critical distance between the phenomenal world and its interpretation” (2011: 1). Confusing a representation with the ‘thing itself’ entails an attempt to evade interpretation, which is the basis of humanistic knowledge (See also Chun 2011).

147 Bolter and Grusin focus on visual computer interfaces, but give a brief pre-history of immediacy as well, which can be traced back to the Renaissance and includes painting, photography, film, and television, and techniques of linear perspective, erasure, and automaticity. These strategies are all at work in digital technology (1999: 25).

148 It is therefore crucial to be aware of the different reasons for and contexts in which data is gathered, Van Dijck advises (2014: 201). As Lisa Gitelman adds, we also need to realize that data is interpreted by analysts. There is no such thing as ‘raw data’: “Data are not facts, they are ‘that which is given prior to argument’ . . . in order to provide a rhetorical basis. Data can be good or bad, better or worse, incomplete and insufficient” (2013: 7).

This detour through critiques of datafication finally brings us back to *My Struggle*. The narrator insists that the positivist world-view of datafication and the teleological focus of QS are inimical to art: “Getting things to run smoothly, working to achieve a lack of resistance, this is the antithesis of art’s essence, it is the antithesis of wisdom, which is based on restricting or being restricted” (2013: 462). Through writing, Knausgård seeks to counter the decrease of meaning caused by this lack of resistance, and go against the tendency to “convert everything into numerical figures, beauty as well as forests as well as art as well as bodies” (2013: 89). *My Struggle* thematically responds to the positivism, teleology, and immediacy of datafication by insisting on friction, opacity, ambiguity, imperfection, boredom, and failure. More importantly, the form of the novels embodies a resistance to perceived immediacy and simultaneity, by foregrounding mediacy and delay. My analysis of these aspects will offer insight in how the monumental novel, even if profoundly transformed by new media, harbors after all a kernel of resistance to the positivist attitude towards instantaneity, teleology, and immediacy in today’s media-scape.

3.4.2 Digression, delay, and mediacy

Life is not a mathematical quantity

– Knausgård, *A Man in Love*¹⁴⁹

Unlike current possibilities of logging, automated reports, and self-tracking, prose writing is not a synchronous form of recording. We will now examine how Knausgård’s writing emphasizes this lapse in time and thereby opens a space of reflection on mediacy. Recall how the author embarks upon his mission to retrieve ‘lost time’ from questions such as “How did I end up here? Why did things turn out like *this*?” (2012: 25). His search for answers to these questions is complicated by two characteristics of monumental writing that have come up before: digression and regression. After all, existential questions like these demand a clear frame of reference: where does one begin narrating one’s life story? Such a frame is lacking in *My Struggle*, as I have already determined. This lack of clear temporal demarcation can be explained by the high degree of narrative regression in the works, which, as we know, problematizes the act of situating an origin. As I wrote in chapter one, this characteristic of prose narrative is familiar from *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67), who makes it his mission to tell his life-story *ab ovo* and begins by relaying the details of his conception. The act of storytelling, however, leads him further and further back, until finally his autobiography ends

149 (2013: 17)

four years before he was born.¹⁵⁰ Knausgård is driven by the impossible ambition to be ‘all-encompassing’ and similarly struggles to frame his own life story. In order to comprehend who the writer is, we must know his father, of whom he says in an interview: “He made me, so a lot of the things in this book come from him” (De Geus, 2011: np.). And to know why his father came to behave the way he did, we should know the story of *his* parents. The origins of the author’s current crisis are pushed back in regression.

On the other end of the temporal spectrum, the ending of the series is digressively pushed forward through continuous interruption of the story by new memories that are brought up by association. In an interview, Knausgård explains the experimental character of his choice for this exceptionally digressive style of narration:

In *Min Kamp*, I wanted to see how far it was possible to take realism before it would be impossible to read. . . . I would see how far I could take a digression out before I needed to go back to the narration, and I discovered I could go for thirty or forty pages, and then the digressions took over. So in *Min Kamp* I’m doing nothing but digressions, no story lines. (Barron 2013: np)

When the narrator, for instance, tells of his teenage self going through great pains to transport a case of beer to a New Year’s Eve party, he explores so many by-ways that this minor event takes up over seventy pages. Indeed, the many digressions in his writings take over the narrative altogether and make the story arch a secondary concern.

The digressions enact an interminability that is reinforced by the fact that life kept happening to Knausgård during the writing and publication of *My Struggle*. The act of living itself, which Knausgård deems subsidiary to writing, is increasingly detracted from by the time and effort required for recording. Therefore, writing demands sacrifices: moments of conflict between him and his first wife, missing episodes from his daughter’s first year. Many of the author’s loved ones, moreover, were drastically affected by the publicity. Some of his relatives tried to prevent publication, threatening the writer with legal action for revealing painful details concerning his father’s alcoholism and violent temper (Hughes 2014). His wife Linda, who suffers from manic depression, even went into a psychosis as a result of the enormous

150 As Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier describe in a chapter on census-taking, an activity that they see as the precursor of today’s datafication, this process was once just as slow. Thus in 1880, the census of the US constitution took eight years to complete, meaning that the information was obsolete even before it became available (2013: 24). So accounting, too, was once slower than living. In computerized society, these processes become instantaneous.

commotion around the books (*Ibid.*). These ramifications of previous publications have become the subject of the last volume in the series (2011). The lack of separation between life and work forces the author to draw ever larger circles around his memories in an unsuccessful attempt to encapsulate them in an *oeuvre*.

Where Knausgård initially maintained that he would definitively stop writing literature upon conclusion of the project—“I’ll never write another novel again” (Mussen 2011)¹⁵¹—he retracted this statement shortly after the publication of the sixth and last volume in 2011: “it seems like I can’t stop myself” (Vaughan 2014). His ‘graphomania’ leads to a seemingly endless narration: “I wanted everything to last and go on forever. All ends were frightening” (2014: 394). Knausgård’s autobiographical writing might restrain the rest of his life, but it is expansive in its continual production of more writing. It becomes (as Brooks wrote about Rousseau’s *Confessions*) “a powerful narrative machine. Any time one goes over a moment of the past, the machine can be relied on to produce more narrative” (1984: 33). According to a Shandian logic of infinite digression and regression, *the more Knausgård writes, the more he shall have to write*.

This is especially the case as the process of writing *itself* is reported in writing—“a page-and-a-half in a month-and-a-half” ... “three pages, two months’ work” (2014a: 444). Recording his life, the author continuously reports how this process of recording unfolds. To give an example: near the beginning of the first volume he describes how, on an evening in 2008 when wife and children had gone to bed, he sat down to write the first pages of this autobiographical epic: “Today is 27 February. The time is 11.43 p.m.” (2012: 22). In the second volume, he describes how this passage came to be:

at half past eleven I went into the bedroom, opened a document and began to write.

In the window before me I can vaguely see the image of my face. Apart from the eyes, which are shining, and the part directly beneath, which dimly reflects light, the whole of the left side lies in shade. Two deep furrows run down the forehead, one deep furrow runs down each cheek, all filled as it were with darkness, and when the eyes are staring and serious, and the mouth turned down at the corners it is impossible not to think of this face as sombre.

What is it that has etched itself into you?

151 Knausgård claims to envy Rimbaud in this respect, whose final act as an artist was to quit art altogether (2012: 177). The final line in the final volume reads: “And I’m so happy that I’m no longer an author” (2011: 1118).

The next day I continued. The idea was to get as close as possible to my life, so I wrote about Linda and John sleeping in the adjacent room, Vanja and Heidi, who were at the nursery, the view from the window and the music I was listening to. (2013: 14-15)

The passage he reports in italics is an almost literal repetition of one in the first book in the series. Like in Facebook's Timeline and automated diaries, this record is an open-ended process. However, the above-quoted passage drives home an important difference: instead of social media's supposed instantaneity of recording, prose writing is a *time-consuming* process. Instead of the transparency and authenticity experienced of 'real time' media, writing creates a distancing effect with respect to the 'thing itself'. The author never succeeds in capturing the 'here and now' he sets out to grasp, since writing is too slow, it lags behind life.

This delay is caused by the linearity of his medium of choice, the prose novel, in which synchronicity, or a superimposition of both time frames (of writing and experiencing), is impossible. Writing forces the narrator to record one event after the other. Since writing and living for Knausgård are complexly intertwined, however, he is compelled to always be at two places at once—which, ironically, was his initial critique of our mediated present that led to his writing project. The delay thus affected stems from a resistance that is embedded in the linear, finite form of the novel, which poses an obstruction to any straightforward or 'transparent' reporting of events. This resistance is felt by the reader, too. Its quantitative strategies of representation notwithstanding, the book is not a database or a personal memory machine from which we can instantaneously retrieve sought-after information. We have to plow through the linearity of the codex.

In addition, Knausgård repeatedly points to the non-transparency of the medium of written language, which never seems to 'get it right':

The dream had been incredibly sensational, but when I wrote it down, nothing remained of it . . . All those fires in the dark, the high mountains and that enormous plain, it had been absolutely fantastic! Yet, on paper it didn't count for anything. (2013a: 322)

Instead of a 'transparent' presentation of the real, we experience the enjoyments and frustrations of the opacity of the medium itself, its inevitable mediations and displacements (see Derrida 1978: 157). Knausgård's struggle with writing stems from a tension between "the fluidity of subjectivity and the linearity of prose . . . between the endlessness of opinions and the finiteness (even when repeated daily) of a single folio half-sheet (Keymer 2004: 365). Serialized writing, which

lends itself to performative and cumulative representations of a 'self' in flux, is also a particularly suitable medium in which to dramatize and perform these struggles of living and writing in their competing temporalities. By not smoothing over these frictions of mediacy, but rather making them into a central drama that unfolds on the page, Knausgård makes us experience the medium instead of trying to make it 'annihilate itself'.

3.4.3 From 'real time' to 'unproductive time'

The delay that is caused by this resistance in prose writing as a time-bound process, has an important advantage to offer. The distance between both temporalities (of writing and living) opens up a space between the 'I' that writes and the 'I' that experiences. This distance enables the author to reflect on the time of recording in relation to the time told: e.g. "As I sit writing this, I recognise that more than thirty years have passed" (2012: 22), and: "Only a man of forty could have written this" (2013a: 159). It is in this in-between space of mediacy that art gives meaning to the world, as the narrator states while reflecting on nineteenth-century paintings:

there was always a certain objectivity to them, by which I mean a distance between reality and the portrayal of reality, and it was doubtless in this interlying space where it "happened," where it appeared, whatever it was I saw, when the world seemed to step forward from the world. (2012: 199)

In the case of Knausgård's writing, this in-between space between the dual temporalities of the writing and the experiencing 'I' offers the possibility for reflection on quotidian, seemingly insignificant experiences. In this sense, it brings the 'why?'-question back in representation, and with it the possibility of attending to the 'qualitative' in addition to the quantitative self.

We could even say that Knausgård's acknowledgement of his struggles with the non-immediacy and opacity of his writing, makes his prose more realistic rather than more artificial. The stops and breaks in his narration evoke the rhythms of everyday life. As in pattern writings from the eighteenth century, such as Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, "digression takes you past absences on behalf of a rhythm like daily life". Indeed, our lives very rarely "run like a well-tuned dramatic engine, telling its story like a drumbeat" (Klein 2008: 91). Detours, dead-end streets, misapprehensions, and slippages in memory are part and parcel of life. Thus, digressive narration, delay, and medial obstruction lead to an experience of time that differs from both traditional narratives with an over-arching, causal structure, and instantaneous modes of recording. Through these properties,

the text takes on the rhythms of that same dailiness in which it is produced and which it mirrors. . . . What becomes celebrated here is a sort of victory of life over art, . . . a return to the continuum, the Cyclical, the Periodical, the Regular. (Eco 1985: 179)

This different conception of time harbors a potential counterforce to the teleology and positivism that surround the advent of datafication. Mediacy, delay, and indirection hold a promise of pleasure and provocation in societies that privilege directness, speed, and immediacy, “doing it fast, getting there right away” (Chambers 1999: 11). They open up the prospect of ‘unproductive time’.¹⁵²

A space for reflection is opened through the inscription of such ‘wasted’ moments. Such temporal experiences, although developers of self-tracking apps would want us to believe otherwise, constitute an important part of daily life. And yet, they are mostly excluded from official and historical accounts, as well as (self-)representation in digital media. There is an unspoken agreement that forms the exception to contemporary trends of recording ‘everything,’ which holds that certain events—such as conflicts, depressions, and shameful memories, but also household routines—should go *unrecorded* because they are “too dull or too poignant for any kind of inscription” (Van Dijck 2007: 6). Most of our life’s experiences, Van Dijck reminds us, remain undocumented, and often intentionally so. Rather than aiming for ‘total recall,’ it is these experiences that Knausgård seeks to win back.

As an act of inscribing ‘wasted time,’ then, repetitive narration of trivial and mundane events holds a gesture of rebellion. This counterforce resides, for instance, in the repetitive behavior and events in *My Struggle*,¹⁵³ coupled to a thematic insistence on the trivial. The inclusive urge to preserve leads to a plenitude of trivial details—16 lines are devoted to making tea (2012: 76), 9 lines on the attacks of 11

152 In his last, posthumously published novel *The Pale King. An unfinished Novel* (2011), David Foster Wallace makes a similar, albeit explicit statement by presenting boredom as modern heroism: “the ability . . . to find the other side of the rote, the picayune, the meaningless, the repetitive, the pointlessly complex. To be in a word, unborable. . . . It is the key to modern life. If you are immune to boredom, there is literally nothing you cannot accomplish” (438). On boredom in Wallace’s work, See Den Dulk 2014.

153 We should understand the importance of repetition in the monumental novel in the context of Nietzsche’s proclamation that the Eternal Return of the same is the only possibility left for us to imagine infinity after the death of God and the end of transcendence (1882). Georges Bataille, too, has written about the repetitive, excess, and unproductive waste of time, which he claimed was our only prospect at escape from the modern ideology of progress (1985). Lastly, in *Difference and Repetition* (1968) Gilles Deleuze goes one step further and promotes repetition as radically artificial and hostile to nature. For him, practicing literal repetition is a way to force a rupture in the continuity of life by creating a non-historical excess of time through art.

September 2001 (2014: 625). This emphasis on the mundane is in manifest opposition to the ongoing and episodic writing of the weblog, which is often goal-oriented and emphasizes small successes (Rettberg 2014a).¹⁵⁴ Self-tracking and life logs reveal an even stronger insistence on self-improvement through small, attainable goals (2014: 58-9). Tracking apps present activities like changing diapers and taking out the garbage as challenges to be met and personal skills to be perfected. Knausgård, by contrast, believes that meaning requires resistance. He strongly opposes this 'efficient' way of living, as evidenced by repeated tirades against

easy options, short cuts, savings, rationality, which I despised and opposed wherever I could, even if it was of the most trivial significance. Why should you live in a world without feeling its weight? Were we just images? And what were we actually saving energy for with these energy-saving devices? (2012: 211)

Obstructions, he opines, are there to be fought, not to be smoothed over: he longs for "[s]udden precipices, unexpected blasts of wind, enormous walls of resistance" (2013: 462). In a world where technological development leads us to believe that we should strive to be better, more beautiful versions of ourselves who manage their time more efficiently, he locates the epic in the mundane, the messy, and the ugly. Rather than small victories like weight loss and landmarks like promotions and baby's first steps,¹⁵⁵ Knausgård foregrounds the repetitive nature of daily life and failure, letting the reader share in the experience of everyday existence as a form of Sisyphean labor:

Time is slipping away from me, running through my fingers like sand while I . . . do what? Clean floors, wash clothes, make dinner, wash up, go shopping, play with the children. . . . It is a struggle, and even though it is not

154 From a weblog about blogging: "By and large, the blogs tell success stories. They have to - blogging as a literary form supports the idea of eventual success. When there's bad news from the bathroom scale, the open-endedness of blogging makes it possible to cast the gain as just a temporary setback, not a failure" (Diane Greco 2004; qtd. in Rettberg 2014: 30).

155 As Simanowski (2012) points out, with the structure embedded in the life events in its Timeline, Facebook functions as a filter that forms life into a story of constant progress. It lists weight loss as a kind of life event you can add to your time, but it doesn't list weight gain. It suggests you might like to add quitting a habit to your Timeline as a life event, but does not suggest sharing that you have started a habit (23). This exemplifies a tendency to evaluate the importance of life events according to schemes that are a priori ingrained in our consciousness, as Van Dijck writes. Choosing to record these events is then stipulated beforehand through conventions that tell us which events are "symbolic or ritual highlights and thus worth flagging" (2007: 6)

heroic, I am up against a superior force, for no matter how much housework I do the rooms are still littered with mess and junk, and the children, who are taken care of every waking minute, are more stubborn than I've ever known children to be. (2012: 28)

The 'redundancy' of these daily chores constitutes its own ever-repeating loop. The author retrieves wasted time in this fashion, for pages on end.

The reference to the series' title the above-cited fragment reveals the ironic twist to Knausgård's monumentality. Rather than alluding to megalomania and great battles, it relates to the remarkably un-heroic struggle against everyday meaninglessness, a struggle with which statistics cannot help. The seeming immediacy and the overvaluation of efficiency of dataism and QS (tracking and logging ourselves on an inexorably straight march into the future) impart a false sense of control, precisely by making us forget what is not measurable and controllable.¹⁵⁶ Through a revaluation of delay, mediacy, and performative failure, Knausgård's writing brings the uncontrollable and immeasurable back into life.

In the final analysis, I can affirmatively answer the second part of my question for this chapter, as to the possibilities of resistance to the perceived transparency of data in the monumental novel's unique properties. *My Struggle* enacts failure and wasted time. It helps us reflect on alternative ways of inscribing everyday experiences in a non-instantaneous manner. Thus it opens up a space for experiences that we tend to overlook when using digital media and social networking sites. Most of the characteristics of Knausgård's writing that I have addressed in this section are part of a long tradition in (fictional) autobiographical literature (as my references to Rousseau and Sterne underwrite). Yet these aspects beget the character of a provocation and thus become newly urgent in an age of big data and quantified selves.

Conclusion

As my analyses throughout this chapter have demonstrated, Knausgård's presents his monumental writing in opposition to the present status quo in media and culture. As have I argued, this is only a rhetoric of self-monumentalization that should create a renewed sense of importance

156 The unease that the uncontrollable provokes, as that which cannot be quantified and mapped, is the subject of an epiphany for Mae Holland, the protagonist of Eggers's *The Circle*: "It occurred to her, in a moment of sudden clarity, that what had always caused her anxiety, or stress, or worry, was not any one force, nothing independent and external – it wasn't danger to herself or the constant calamity of other people and their problems. It was internal: it was subjective: it was not knowing" (2013: 194).

for literature. He reinvents the autobiographical novel as monumental by first painting this picture of a world in which 'authentic' art and literature have become impossibilities, to then offer his writing as a tool to 'break open' and bring closer a world that has been hermetically sealed off and put at a distance. He also sacrifices himself, as the last-standing Romantic author willing to suffer for literature.

In reality, his monumental writing dialectically relates to current developments of big data and quantification. This happens in two directions, according to the Janus-faced logic of the monumental. On one level, many of the concerns that drive these writings, as well as their serial and quantified ordering principles, betray the influence of practices of self-representation in new media. On another level this dialectical relation lies in the fact that the hyper-connectivity of the mediated present brings certain characteristics of the book-bound novel and digressive prose narration once again sharply into view, such as delay, non-simultaneity, and mediacy. Thus, *My Struggle* has one eye at the literature's past and one at its future.

Starting as a quest to restore meaning to lost time, Knausgård creates a monument so comprehensive that it finally exceeds the self-centered and exhibitionist perspective that we would expect from a six-volume autobiography. Like Proust, Knausgård saves 'wasted' moments from oblivion. But by refusing to select, by striving to preserve even the most mundane of his memories (making tea, doing the dishes), he makes the reader retrieve these lost moments for herself. Thus his writing reaches a level of universality that monumentalizes the lives and memories of his readers as well. Knausgård's struggle becomes our struggle too. In an anti-monumental gesture of the mundane and trivial, his specific branch of literary exhibitionism flaunts a life that is easily as mediocre as most of his readers'. In this respect, the fact that Knausgård's novels are well-received says something about the present moment. Zadie Smith (qtd. in Leyshon and Rothman 2014), for one, has remarked upon their addictive quality (which ties in well with the cumulative, always-craving-one-more logic of the serial). Why would we want to read about the activities in someone else's life when these activities are in themselves so boring that we barely register them in our own lives? I think this is because *My Struggle* defamiliarizes the exhibitionism of social media. Through Knausgård's sheer radicalism in exposing the smallest details of his life, what he describes far surpasses the scope of his life alone, and starts to refer instead to all our lives. Thus his exhibitionism tips over into something else, and his writing explodes the autobiographical genre to become an inclusive monument to the everyday. Rather than focusing on a unique individual, in its repetitive inscription of wasted time, *My Struggle* breaks the mold of the autobiography – it implicates us all.

As my analysis of this comparative case study between autobiographical novel and new media has made clear, by incorporating strategies of

representation from newer media, the monumental novel functions as a ground for experimentation, a laboratory to test the implications of the contemporary urge to collect, archive, store, and record 'everything'. The monumental novel reflects on, and re-thinks, the literary by updating older practices of representation (such as chronicles, lists, and enumerations) in a dialogue with the present technocultural moment. In the next and final chapter I will show how the becoming-global of the world inspires Vollmann and Danielewski to look back to the trope of the book-as-world, thus making the book-bound novel anew.

Chapter four

The Book-as-World-as-Book: Between the National and the Global

*Only because the past is dead is one able to read it.
Only because history is fetishized in physical objects can one understand it.
Only because the book is a world can one enter it.*

—Susan Sontag, “Under the Sign of Saturn.”¹⁵⁷

In the preceding two chapters I analyzed current transformations of narrative structures under the influence of new media. The present chapter builds upon the insights I arrived at so far, and applies them to the relation between the monumental and the global. The central paradox that informs this topic concerns the ‘representability’ of the globe. On the one hand, the world exceeds every possible representation in its vastness. This is one of the most important instances of Kant’s mathematical sublime: “That is sublime which even to be able to think of demonstrates a faculty of the mind that surpasses every measure of the senses” (2008 §25: 34). Moreover, there is no outside position from which we could possibly grasp the world’s meaning, because we take part in it (we are worldly, *of* this world, even when we observe it from space). On the other hand, following from this lack of an outside position, as Knausgård complains in *My Struggle*, the world has become too small. We have mapped and charted geographical space to the millimeter and are able to travel the globe with much more ease than before. At the same time, science has revealed the inner workings of phenomena from the smallest quark to the largest ecosystem. The ‘beyond’ that the Romantic longed for has retreated as a possibility of escape: there are no more ‘other worlds,’ no measures of comparison. Any medium through which

157 (1978: 126)

we seek to represent the whole world has to contend with this paradox.

Even if the world cannot be represented, the book-as-world remains a persistent trope in monumental novels and their representations of global constellations. Notions such as 'mastery' and 'totalization' have been critically scrutinized in postmodern theory (Hutcheon 1988; Eagleton 1990), as well as theories of world literature that propose to study planetary constellations as an alternative to the global (Spivak 2003; Apter 2003). Nevertheless, contemporary authors of monumental novels continue to incorporate an exceedingly large number of different geographic settings in their narration (e.g. Bolaño, David Mitchell, Jonathan Franzen, and David Foster Wallace). It would be off the mark to condemn monumental novels that seek to encapsulate a global scope as being by definition guilty of reinscribing power imbalances and cultural asymmetries. How, then, can we critically analyze these representations that tend toward the 'all-encompassing'? Is it possible to continue our scholarly engagement with totalizing ambitions in the monumental novel while avoiding the trap of totalization in an ideological sense?

The problem of representing the global emerges in the monumental novel as an occupation with issues of scales of representation. In the present chapter, I further analyze novelistic attempts to make sense of incongruences or 'scale variances,' more specifically between the national and the global. How do today's monumental novels negotiate between the close-at-home and the planetary? What framework can serve us when we want to analyze writers who are ambitious enough to take on a whole array of heterogeneous entities dispersed across cultures and nations as their terrain?

These questions will be probed through the analysis of two case studies: William T. Vollmann's *The Atlas* (1996) and Mark Z. Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* (2006). In a sense, I have chosen atypical works by both these authors as a focus for this chapter. Both Vollmann and Danielewski are best known for their centrifugal, excessive works. Danielewski obtained his status as a cult author with *House of Leaves* (2000), a novel that attempts to "incorporate all different kinds of discourses, sign systems, and information into itself, engorging itself in a frenzy of graphomania" (Hayles 2012: 16). In addition, the first, 880-page volume of his projected 27-part series of novels, *The Familiar*, has just been published. In these works, the reader's attention span is pushed to (and perhaps beyond) its limits by writing that fills and overfills the pages.

Vollmann, as one of the most notoriously prolific literary writers of our time, tops Danielewski's output. Since the publication of his debut novel in 1987, he has written no less than twenty-four books (ranging from fiction to journalistic reportage), half of which are over 600 pages, and the grand total of his output surpasses 10,000 pages. His editors have repeatedly tried to persuade him to shorten his work, but the verbose Vollmann will not hear of it: "They want me to cut, and I argue, so they

cut my royalties, and I agree never to write a long book again" (McGrath 2009). For Vollmann, refraining from catering to shortening attention spans and readers' entertainment needs is a matter of artistic autonomy.

Yet, as this chapter will argue by reading of *The Atlas* and *Only Revolutions* together, the monumental comes in other forms besides the excessive. Both these novels differ from the works discussed so far in their form and material characteristics: they are less 'baggy,' and more neatly 'rounded off'. In that respect they are *more monumental* in the traditional sense of the magnum opus, more 'works' than texts. Their formal closure is symbolized through their use of geometrical forms like circles, ellipses, and the palindrome as structuring principles. *Only Revolutions* is a 'novel' (loosely categorized, since it also has properties of a lyric, visual poem) that operates through severe constraints. To mention just one example here, it consists of two stream-of-consciousness monologues that each amount to exactly 360 pages, with an exact amount of 360 words per page.¹⁵⁸ *The Atlas*, too, is uncharacteristically compressed, with a palindromic structure of 26+26 stories, set in different geographic locations, that revolve around the axis of the book. Both works trace an orb around the territory they describe: a circle, arguably the most monumental of forms, as it embodies a perfect self-enclosure. Through these formal aspects, both authors demonstrate a great degree of 'mastery' over their book objects, the art of composition, and, by extension, the global scope they strive to encapsulate.

In their artistic attempts to encompass 'the world' in their works, both authors use the medium-specific affordances of the book-bound novel in innovative ways.¹⁵⁹ Both novels can be described as 'hybrid': rather than 'merely' illustrative, materiality and visual design are here fully integrated as a structural dimension of the narrative. In novels like these, word and image "breed to produce a new creature" (Sadokierski, 2010: 3). Drucker has given the following description of the unique possibilities

158 Hayles (2012) furthermore points out an invisible constraint that governs the discourse of the entire text of *Only Revolutions*. *House of Leaves* functions as a mirror opposite to this text. Whatever was emphasized in Danielewski's debut was forbidden to appear in *Only Revolutions*, "so that what cannot be spoken or written becomes a powerful force in determining what is written or spoken" (16-7). See also Pressman 2014: 162.

159 Vollmann, like Danielewski, always pays attention to the visual aspects of literature. He designs and includes graphs, photographs, maps, drawings, and typography as integral elements in his texts, foregrounding the intermedial potential of the book. He crafts special editions of his own writings and makes book objects and handmade collectors' items such as *The Happy Girls* (1990) and *The Convict Bird* (1988). He also designs his own mass-produced books if possible, in collaboration with visual artists. Growing out of his interest in the design aspects of his own books and in the visual arts, and inspired specifically by Blake's experiments in illuminated printing, these book objects combine text with visual and other tactile elements that typically reinforce the central metaphor of the text. (See McCaffery and Hemmingson 2004; Spielmann 1993).

that the codex offers, precisely because of its delimited form:

The structural boundedness of the book and the discreteness of the delimited page make the expansions produced by intercutting, insertion, or other means, into significant gestures, inserting tension in the necessarily finite form of the codex; the theoretically infinite extension of an electronic document can't register such elements as a meaningful transgression of limits. The space within a book can be understood as both literal and conceptual. (1997: 99)

The hybrid works by Vollmann and Danielewski employ these characteristics in a meaningful integration. The shape and texture of book, page, and print all play into this dynamics.

But these authors do not foreground the 'analog,' paper materiality of the book just for the sake of experimentation. Both manipulate these properties in order to comment on the relation between book and world. This chapter investigates how they exploit the medium-specific features of the codex, such as boundedness, finitude, linearity, and three-dimensionality, in order to reverse the familiar trope of the book-as-world (e.g. Goodman 1978; Pavel 1986). They imagine the world as a book to transmit a sense of enclosure we experience as the world becomes global. In *The Atlas* and *Only Revolutions*, the book object becomes a spatialized metaphor for our experiences of worldliness under the influence of globalization. It formally enacts an experience the protagonists suffer from, which I argue should be described as a lack of a 'beyond' or an 'outside'. Both novels use the enclosed space of the book to situate characters in our late-global situation. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have diagnosed this situation in terms of a collapse of the (spatial and conceptual) division of the world into an 'inside' and an 'outside' domain: "In the passage from modern to postmodern and from imperialism to Empire there is progressively less distinction between inside and outside" (2000: 187). The novels that I study in this chapter perform this retreat of the outside, by playing with the capacity of the book to bind and encapsulate narrative spaces. In doing so, they reinvent the monumental book-bound narrative as a 'navigable space' (Manovich 2001), bringing narrative back to its original Greek meaning of both 'guiding' and 'transgressing' (De Certeau 1984: 129). Both *The Atlas* and *Only Revolutions* spatialize the reading experience. As we shall see, however, their books project unstable worlds, in which the contained and the container bleed into one another.

I will show how these projects subvert the familiar image of the book-as-world into the material world-as-book and enable these authors to offer imaginative alternatives to globalization as a "levelling process

of a spreading global consumerism" (Damrosch 2003: 11) that leads to "the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere" (Spivak 2003: 72). In reimagining the world-as-book, they invite the reader to rethink transnational relationality. Ultimately, reading Vollmann and Danielewski together will offer new insights into how monumental works represent global situations in a critical way, without denying their own implication in them.

In the first section of the chapter I lay out a theoretical frame. As a contrastive framework I discuss recent visual representations of the globe by Geographic Information Systems (GIS), of which the most well-known is Google Earth. This will allow us to critically assess contemporary practices of 'total' representations of the earth, specifically those that harbor implicit promises of mastery and control over the globe. Systems like Google Earth instantiate a politics of space that, in Michel de Certeau's words, "makes possible a panoptic practice proceeding from a place whence the eye can transform foreign forces into objects that can be observed and measured, and thus control and 'include' them within its scope of vision" (1984: 36). I also discuss the postmodern critique of totalization and critically investigate Tom LeClair's claim, in *The Art of Excess* (1989), that we should recuperate 'mastery' as a category of analysis for novels of a particularly global scope. I then turn to Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Sense of the World* (1997) and *The Creation of the World, or, Globalization* (2007), through which I can read the current project of monumental novels in relation to our late-global situation.

For Nancy, the 'creation' of the world means we imaginatively reflect on alternative possible forms for the globe. Such acts of *world-forming* should oppose globalization as an oppressive, homogenizing force. Representations of the world thus become the sites of the "struggle for a world" (2007: 54). Since globalization implies for Nancy the subjection of the world under a general concept of the globe, this struggle takes place through the production of a form for the world "that is not only produced in the absence of any given, but held infinitely beyond any possible given . . . it is never inscribed in a representation, and nonetheless always at work and in circulation in the forms that are being invented" (52). In their inventions of new material forms for literature to reflect on our relations to the world, I argue, Vollmann and Danielewski further this project of world-forming.

In the subsequent sections (4.2 and 4.3) I establish how Vollmann's and Danielewski's projects speak to our present need for world-forming to counteract the uniformity of globalization. I show how they compose their narratives according to an approach of 'scale variance,' an awareness that the realities they represent change according to the distance or proximity of the observer. There is a continuous mutual impingement at work in these novels between the local and the worldly. While gesturing toward the global in their scope, both novels overtly implicate themselves

in American traditions of literature and myth making of which they are critical, but which they do not pretend to transcend. Especially in Vollmann's case, we will see that this also has problematic dimensions of reiterating long-standing American archetypes like the lone cowboy who 'collects' women in the towns he visits, but always leaves behind. Both create literary worlds that maintain a referential relation to the horizons of our concrete world, yet do not attempt to cover up asymmetrical power relations between the US and the rest of the world.

Reading Vollmann together with Danielewski will show that the monumental novel can comment on global situations in a meaningful way, while resisting the self-enclosed and all-encompassing forms that postmodernist critics discarded decades ago. Moreover, these works refute the conflation between representation and reality that characterizes today's data-informed media-culture. Expanding upon Nancy, this chapter states that literature cannot master 'the' world, but can imaginatively construe alternative relations between book and world that allow for critical reflection on our global situation in the digital age. This will give us insight in how monumental works are able to comment on, and maintain a critical distance from, globalization, without denying that they are themselves implied in these processes, and are in fact products of the global imbalances they seek to address.

4.1 The 'Total Novel' in a Global Perspective

This section sets the theoretical frame of the chapter. First, I discuss present-day attempts at representing 'the whole world' in projects of digital mapping as a point of contrast for the novels. Then, I address contemporary literature's possibilities to offer totalizing representations of global realities. How can the monumental novel inscribe itself in a global context and address expanding scopes of reference (aesthetic, ethical, political) in meaningful ways? Can it do so while steering clear of the ideological pitfalls of totalization and mastery, and thus avoid revisiting Western traditions of imperialism and geographical expansionism? In order to answer these questions I turn to Nancy's reflections on the problems and possibilities of making sense of the world in our current state of late globalization. His philosophy casts an interesting light on discussions of the world in relation to the novel, and in particular the paradox that the world is finite (there is but one world, without a 'beyond'), yet un-representable in its vastness. Nancy reflects on the infliction of being enclosed in a radical immanence, without the promise of transcendence offered by a position 'outside' (which is characteristic of our secularized, late-global world). Taking up Nancy's distinction between globalization on the one hand and *mondialisation*, or world-making, on the other, I argue that we should understand

the contemporary projects of monumental novels precisely as acts of *world-forming* that posit alternatives to the homogenous sameness that processes of globalization impose upon the globe.

The ambition to capture the world between the covers of the book in general, or the novel in particular, has been persistent throughout the history of literature. The image of the book-as-world has surfaced in a variety of forms: from Bakhtin's conceptualization of the novel as containing, like the societal world, numerous voices or 'heteroglossia' (1981) to Blanchot's *Le livre à venir* (1959); from Mallarmé's famous insistence that "everything in the world exists to end up in a book" (qtd. in Arnar 2011: 312) to Joyce's *Ulysses* as 'book as world' (French 1978) and the attempts of Goethe scholars to create the "Book of Everything" (Piper 2006); and from Vargas Llosa's *novela totalizadora* (Brody 1977) to Elizabeth Eisenstein's historical account of early print technology and the vision of the book usurping all media (2002). The age-old dream of "fitting the whole world inside the single text" (Portelli 1994: 100) is pervasive.

Of course, the book-as-world cannot be more than a metaphor. As Fredric Jameson has pointed out, "totality is not available for representation, any more than it is accessible in the form of some ultimate truth (or Absolute Spirit)" (1981: 39; see also Lyotard 1993: 25-6). The world is one of the most important instances of an idea of magnitude in the Kantian mathematic sublime. As such, it is un-representable as a totality: we can only list its parts in a seemingly infinite, yet always incomplete enumeration. "It is . . . as if the imagination included a sound barrier," as Jameson describes this mental incapacity in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, "undetectable save in those moments in which the representational task or program suddenly collapses" (1992: 4). The mathematical sublime in this case indicates not so much the mind's limits, as Kant held, but rather the historically specific problem of representing the globalized world system and its inhabitants.

The un-representability of the world as a totality seems like a truism. However, in the light of the new positivism discussed in the last chapter, it could not hurt to reestablish this fact. I argued with Van Dijck that the philosophy of 'dataism' too often conflates measurements and representations with reality and promotes a renewed belief in objectivity. This positivist attitude is also noticeable in representations of the globe. Even if postmodern theory in cartography established decades ago that maps are always to some extent subjective and necessarily contain blind spots (MacEachren 1995: 10; Wood and Fels 1992: 60), new possibilities of mapping the earth through digital media are still too often thought to somehow approximate their 'real' territory. Enthusiasts of digital implementations of maps like Geographic Information Systems (GIS), make it seem as if: first, we could measure the world on a scale that somehow lies *outside* that world; second, we humans, as creators of these

representations, are not ourselves a part of that which we seek to map; and third, the very measurements and mapping practices do not affect their objects.

4.1.1 Google's Earth

The most notable example of such GIS systems is the Google Earth software program. A short detour into this topic will allow me to draw out some of the specific confusions that characterize the ways in which the relation between the digital map and the global territory are understood. Since 2005, the "Googlization of everything" (Vaidhyanathan 2011) includes Google Earth, a service that allows users to manipulate satellite images to explore the Earth from above. Google Earth virtualizes the analog image of a floating ball in space.¹⁶⁰ Earlier iconic representations of this analog image, such as the 'Whole-Earth' photographs of the Apollo space missions, were rhetorically employed to remind people of their finitude and dependence upon a fragile ball in space. Google's representations of the earth, by contrast, give their users a sense of power (Farman 2010:2).

Google Earth is a digitized index of the globe that serves as a platform for users to engage with. The user can zoom in and out, from the planetary to her own home, and 'fly' over the surface of the earth. In the aesthetics of scale, this smooth zoom effect is the opposite of 'scale variance'. A relatively recent field of scholarly attention, scale variance insists that our observations and the operation of systems are subject to different scales. Scale is *beyond measure*. It is not an absolute unit, but a comparative relation: you need two scales to talk about scale at all (Woods 2014: 134).¹⁶¹ By allowing users to effortlessly move between first- and third person perspectives, between the world as interface on eye level and as a ball in space, Google Earth smooths over the incongruences between scales. It displays a misleadingly neutral and friction-less aesthetic.

These movements might seem fluid, but behind the scenes they are controlled by the operations of Google. There is only an apparent

160 This image of the medium, the view of the Earth floating in space, is discursively connected to the aesthetics of the Apollo 14 photographs and to religious modernism, which is foundational to an imperialist geographical imagination. Google Earth's ancestry is colonial cartography and its tools of aerial and satellite imagery are grounded in militaristic uses. (Farman 2010: 82)

161 Scale variance begins to satisfy recent calls by critics such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, Ursula Heise, Timothy Clark, Mark McGurl, Rob Nixon, and others, to think scale in cultural theory. In their texts, scale critique emerges as a means of reflexive and analytic response to scale difference and its mediation. In texts concerned with problems of scale, the presence or absence of scale variance makes a crucial difference in the analysis. In "Scale Critique for the Anthropocene," Derek Woods argues that scale variance should therefore be a central concept when it comes to "reworking categories such as history, society, aesthetics, and technology in light of the geo-historical conditions" (133).

homogeneity to the earth in this representation, a world made accessible even though it has been overlaid with maps, and runs on opaque search engine algorithms. Media studies scholar Wendy Chun reminds us that interfaces, as mediators between the visible and the invisible and as means of navigation, invest in forming “informed” subjects who can overcome the chaos of global capitalism by mapping their relation to the totality of the global-capitalist system. As she notes, “The dream is: the resurgence of the *seemingly* sovereign individual, the subject driven to know, driven to map, to zoom in and out, to manipulate, and to act” (2011: 8). This sovereignty is misleading, she states, because it tends to obscure the infrastructure, the many ‘invisible hands’ at work ‘behind the scenes’ of systems like Google Earth (as a parallel, think of my earlier mention of Wagner’s Festspielhaus at Bayreuth with its hidden orchestra). These systems produce a sense of mastery over the globe that depends on the US-based institutions that produce the imagery.

Such representations of the ‘entire’ globe put the viewer in an illusory position of control. The earth is presented as something we can manipulate and play with. Google Earth’s image of the world “shares with Spaceship Earth something of the quality of a fetish, a shimmering image meant to be consumed, perhaps as an icon of nostalgia for an Earth we may be about to lose” (Helmreich 2011: 1219). It offers the viewer the right angles to aesthetically appreciate an otherwise unimaginable object, presenting the world we inhabit as a “distant planet that seems strangely suspended from the chaos of sociality and life” (Munster 2013: 46). In this respect, even though it is made of satellite photographs, Google Earth does not give us an entirely realistic image, since it maps the “unmappable” (King 2000). Mapping transforms a space from something we are a part of, to something we can read. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988), De Certeau contrasts the ground-level experience of being immersed in a city and seeing its image from a distance, as one of control versus participation:

To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city’s grasp. One’s body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law; nor is it possessed, whether as player or played, by the rumble of so many differences and by the nervousness of New York traffic. When one goes up there, he leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes up in itself any identity of authors or spectators. . . . His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was “possessed” into a text that lies before one’s eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. (92)

Viewed from a distance the city becomes a map that can be read and captured, in its totality. Perceiving the city in this way, the viewer is in a position of power, since she does not risk absorption. Moving at street level, however, the walker is at the city's mercy. Herself part of the creation of this space, she is only able to perceive parts. What retreats beyond the horizon of "Google Earth's earth" is precisely this sense of being-in-the-world that Certeau describes, including the frictions, the messiness of social life, and the ethics of global relations. Thus the un-representable, as something that goes beyond the limits of human senses and reason, is brought back to the scales of human perception and cognition, in a movement of what Manovich (2002) has called the "anti-sublime".

This way of seeing earth has serious ideological underpinnings. As Google Earth zooms in on the planet from a supposed distance, the "disembodied master subject" as theorized by Donna Haraway "see[s] everything from nowhere" (1991: 189). Like the quantifications of human behavior I discussed in the previous chapter, these representations are believed to be *objective*; they are meant to 'simply' be immediate images of reality and, as such, they are taken to reside outside the realm of cultural interpretation. As Mei-Po Kwan writes (2002), the problem with GIS as software that gathers empirical data and presents it as factual, is that such 'scientific objectivity' typically privileges those in power.

4.1.2 Mastery and totalization

In our interactions with literary texts, of course, such a confusion between the representation of the globe and the world itself would be much less likely to arise. Letters, pages, and books do not generally resemble what they signify. Still, there are ideological risks inherent to the idea of a 'total' novel as well. Literary theorists have assessed these risks and the ideological impostures associated with them, such as the totalizing 'grand narrative'. In *The Theory of the Novel* (orig. 1920), Lukács famously defined the novel as a form that longs for the totality of the epic, but is, at the same time, aware of its impossibility: "The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality" (1971: 56). Thus, Lukács sees the urge to totalize as inherent to all novelistic enterprises: all novels, even small ones, strive for a total representation of the world. In postmodernism, this will to totalization has become suspect.¹⁶² Linda Hutcheon writes that totalization

¹⁶² Jameson (1991) points to a crucial difference between totalization and totality. Whereas the latter suggests a privileged "bird's-eye view" of a larger whole, totalization concerns precisely the *impossibility* to attain such a position. We could see this distinction

does not just mean to unify, but rather means to unify with an eye to power and control, and as such, this term points to the hidden power relations behind our humanist and positivist systems of unifying disparate materials, be they aesthetic or scientific. (1988: xi)

Postmodernist critics fear that as cultural forms strive to become all-encompassing, their users run the ideological risk of repeating the drive towards expansionism and imperialism that has led to misuses of social and political power in Western culture—although one could question the one-on-one relationship between the aesthetic and the political that Hutcheon presupposes here.

And yet, postmodernist criticism has by no means led to a literary production comprised solely of *micro-récits*. As Ercolino remarks,

After the World War II, when the ideological apparatus of modernity inexorably collapsed under the blows of history, a certain brand of postmodern literature remained stubbornly anchored to the encyclopedic and universalizing dream of modernism. A dream of utopian power, which seemed, and still seems, without limits. (20014: 28)

And today, due to globalization and developments in technology such as big data and quantification, the influence of scale is increasingly important in Western culture at large, as witnessed by the monumental novels presently under study. Of course, there will always be authors and artists who want to reflect on global situations in a meaningful way, and who wish to lend their works a global scope of reference.

The works I analyze in the following sections are examples of such present-day works: they amass and attempt to encompass an exceedingly large number of different geographic settings in their narration. This does not mean that they are by definition totalizing novels that, in Hutcheon's terms, run the risk of reinscribing imbalances of cultural and ideological power. How, then, do we read and analyze these novels with a critical eye to representations that tend toward the 'all-encompassing'? How can we, as scholars and readers of literature, continue to engage with totalizing ambitions in the monumental novel while avoiding the trap of ideological totalization?

as analogous to the Kantian distinction between apprehension and comprehension. Following Sartre in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Jameson envisions totalization as a summing-up, an enumeration, as opposed to nominalism which claims to capture a whole in one term. Whereas this is a useful distinction that allows us to write about the gesture towards the total within the finite form of the novel, it does of course not render the ideal of 'capturing the whole world in a text' unproblematic.

In *The Art of Excess* (1989), Tom LeClair proposes that we revalue precisely such works that dare to tackle large totalities of global networks and emphasizes their superiority compared to novels of a less ambitious scope. In order to approach these works, he argues for a recuperation of the classificatory category of 'mastery'. Distancing 'mastery' from its prevalent negative connotations, LeClair underscores its liberating potential. Novels that qualify for mastery should register the "multiple new relations among the local and the global, the personal and planetary, the private and the multinational" that make up postmodern American life, and thus master (or: have intellectual power over) the contemporary world (1989: 2). Such a conceptual mastery of reality possesses rhetorical control over the narrative processes by means of which reality is represented. All the topics included in such novels should "exist within and recognize *the* master system—the global ecosystem—that is the ultimate subject of, frequent model for, and reason to write about" these works (32).

LeClair identifies the power to register such a 'global ecosystem' as typically American. His belief echoes Leo Spitzer's statement that "we must admit that it is the American continent, with its enormous size, that made the global world-view possible" (qtd. in Moretti 1996: 64). However, in LeClair's conception, not all American writers can attain mastery: "*Gravity's Rainbow* masters a set of conditions that *The Color Purple* does not address, conditions in which all readers—black or white, female or male, old or young—are imbricated" (3). Females and members of ethnic minorities, he suggests, simply do not have the same amount of time and leisure to absorb the whole range of American culture "from the perspective of full membership" (29). For this reason, novelists who manage to incorporate such a broad spectrum of knowledge are not only American, but also overwhelmingly male and white.

I strongly disagree with LeClair's arguments for a revaluation of so-called literary 'mastery.' His assumption that female and minority writers focus too much on the marginalized status of their 'own' groups to gain access to the broad scope of vision needed to create a 'masterful' novel, is highly dubious in itself (because of its problematic ideological implications that incline towards racism and sexism), especially without empirical evidence to back it up. Even more problematic is the assumption that exerting "intellectual power . . . over the contemporary world" (2) through literary writing is in fact an attainable goal for the white male writer (or indeed, for anyone). The problem with LeClair's theory is totalization from his own particular (white and male) perspective, which is of course just as partial and 'minor' as those he relegates to the margins. Thus he synecdochically extends the self to the world as a whole and mistakes his projections for reality. LeClair makes the same mistakes as those who believe in the objective powers of representations of GIS programs like Google Earth. The underlying assumption that

unites them is an all-too-eager acceptance of the possibility of ‘capturing’ and mapping global systems in their totality. These projects say more about the critics who hold such beliefs in the powers of representation than about the territory they attempt to map.

4.1.3 *Mondialisation* and ‘oneworldedness’

Jean-Luc Nancy offers a more fruitful way to think through the relation between literary representation and the world at large. The philosopher makes a helpful distinction between globalization and *mondialisation*, the latter implying a making of the world. This theoretical project of *mondialisation*, or world-making, will help us understand the novelistic projects of Vollmann and Danielewski in the context of globalization. In particular, Nancy’s philosophy illuminates how monumental works can continue to comment on, and maintain a critical distance from, globalization, without denying that they themselves take part in these processes. Expanding upon Nancy, this chapter states that literature cannot master ‘the’ world, but that it can reflect on alternative ways of representing and thinking the world. Vollmann and Danielewski do this precisely by exploiting the idea of the novel as encompassing the world, and through their innovative use of the volumetric and spatial affordances of the book.

In *The Sense of the World* (1997) and *The Creation of the World or Globalization* (2007), Nancy diagnoses a situation in late globalization¹⁶³ in which the ‘beyond’ retreats from our world, resulting in worldwide uniformity. According to Nancy, this has everything to do with the decline of religion. Under an onto-theological world view, Nancy explains, the world’s meaning still resided outside of the world, as a promise of transcendence. God signifies such another world placed next to our world: “a God distinct from the world would be another world” (2007: 45). With the decline of this onto-theological worldview, Nancy argues, we lost the meaning of a world that was arranged by God and that operated according to the stabilities of a Newtonian universe. The twenty-first century marks the loss of the sense of “a mundus, a cosmos” as a “composed and complete order (from) within which one might find a place, a dwelling, and the elements of an orientation” (1997: 4). This order and this orientation can no longer be derived from transcendental anchoring points *outside* of the material, existential space we inhabit.

In addition to the retreat of God, the autonomous subject who replaced God in Enlightenment philosophy gradually disappeared. In Kantian philosophy, for instance, Reason replaced God and created a noumenal

163 The phase of ‘late’ globalization that we are generally thought to inhabit, was inaugurated with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Late (or: ‘hypernetworked’ or ‘strong’ globalization), according to Christian Moraru, is characterized by a “geographical structure of co-presence” and an emphasis on worldly being-in-relation (2011: 34).

world outside of the sensible. For Schopenhauer (2010), art could still create another world *alongside* the phenomenal realm. Thus even where God has retreated from it, the modern world still preserved a God-like figure as long as there was faith in a transcending power, be it in the form of Reason or in the form of Art. After World War I, this idea of Reason retreated, too, or was absorbed into technology. Consequentially, art could no longer be transcendent (see Horkheimer and Adorno 2002). At this point the world could no longer refer to *another* world and became radically immanent, writes Nancy: “the partition between exterior and interior, that is, this distinction between different ‘worlds’ that seemed to us to configure the world, has been subverted and conflated into one” (Nancy 1997: 6; see also Deleuze 2004: 214-79). It is therefore no longer possible to determine the meaning or ‘sense’ of our world from the perspective of such an outside position. The world disintegrates as a unit of meaning, since it is no longer possible to trace an orb around it.

This development has accelerated and intensified with the world’s becoming global.¹⁶⁴ Henceforth, the borders between what formerly constituted different worlds are retreating, leaving us with one uniform “world-wideness”. The orb dissolves in a non-place of global multiplicity, as a result of which the different parts of the globe (such as the rural in relation to the urban) lose their distinction. Nancy calls this process “agglomeration,” a piling up in which the world is dismantled by the Hegelian “bad infinite” or artificial infinity (1997: 47). This also changes the ways in which we move across global spaces. Since the meaning of the world is no longer located outside, it now resides in the passage to the limit, in “[s]ense as navigation to (or on) the confines of space” (40). A world without an outside cannot be crossed over, only *traversed* from one border to another. Nancy invokes a notion of the planetary as an immanent mode of space, in which movement takes the form of the digressive, or the radically ‘errant’: “[T]he entire world will have become planetary: wandering from one end to the other” (43). This forges a connection between the planetary on the one hand and digressive movement on the other, which, as my analyses of *Only Revolutions* and *The Atlas* will make clear, has important ramifications for attempts at escape through ‘interminable’ narration. Significantly, the artificial infinite in both these novels is configured as a circular structure, as a being-encapsulated.

164 Nancy is certainly not the only philosopher who has theorized the global as a lack of an outside. Hardt and Negri have devoted a subsection of their seminal *Empire* (2000) to this observation, aptly titled “There is no more outside” (186-90). In a very similar argument, political philosopher Carlo Galli writes that in our epoch of globalization, “the external seems to have become internal” (2010: 139). The spaces of modernity were marked by a division of inside and outside, public and private; and universal and particular (I xviii-ixxvii). These categories, Galli argues, have all been destabilized. The global, he claims, has no outside and inside: it is *fractal*.

Nancy assesses our age of late globalization in a decisively negative vein, as a process aimed at enclosure in the undifferentiated sphere of an indistinct unitotality that is accessible for mastery without residue (2007: 28). This is a kind of world we encountered in Knausgård's writing: a world fully mapped, charted, and thus reduced to sameness. In such a totality, all difference has been subsumed under a logic of equivalence, and all gaps and absences have been filled up, with no possibility for the emergence of anything truly new. In Nancy's conception (as in Knausgård's) globalization is therefore hostile to creativity: it precludes the new and the original.

Nonetheless, Nancy does not stop at this negative assessment: he also proposes an alternative notion of worldliness to contrast this anti-creative force of globalization. The philosopher offers a distinction between the *global* and the *worldly*, or globalization and *mondialisation*. This untranslatable term refers to an authentic world-forming (*faire-monde*), or creation of the world. World-forming is never finished, it is a process in continuous expansion. Unlike the abstract unitotality of the global, *mondialisation* maintains a crucial reference to the world's horizon, as a space of human relations, of significations and meanings held in common. It should be noted that Nancy is not writing specifically about literature; in fact he insists that the creation of the world does not have a subject or author (2007: 12; 49). Instead, he offers an alternative way of thinking, without aiming to inscribe it in particular cultural practices. As a consequence, his characterization of *mondialisation* remains remarkably abstract, given its aim of counter-acting the abstract world of globalizing processes.

Nancy coins this notion of world-forming to communicate a less deterministic way of understanding the world, that escapes from a globalized world-view of omnipresent and homogenizing processes. Yet he also writes: "A world perhaps always, at least potentially, shares the unity proper to the work of art. That is, unless it is the opposite, or rather, unless the reciprocity between "world" and "art" is constitutive of both" (42). The latter, I believe, is at stake with Vollmann and Danielewski: a reciprocity between world and art as continuously forming, reforming, and deforming each other. I can therefore justify my application of his notion of world-making to literary novels through the claim that the project of opening new ways of thinking the world is pre-eminently a task for art. In what follows, I analyze Vollmann's *The Atlas* and Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* as artistic practices of such 'world-forming'.

As acts of world-forming, they continue in the tradition of theories such as Thomas Pavel's *Fictional Worlds* (1986), which holds that literary texts may refer to multiple alternative fictional worlds as well as to the 'actual world'. In a similar vein, Nelson Goodman states in *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978) that the world as such is unknowable. All we can capture in representations, he claims, are versions of it, 'ways' of the

world. None of these ways are more 'real' than the others, and all are described from a certain perspective and captured in a symbolic system. The monumental novels I study in this chapter complicate these general theories in that they do not create symbolic 'new worlds' as such, or imagine the book as a fictive world. Instead, they imagine the world in, and as, the material form of the book. Rather than advocating an unrestrained and unproblematized production of alternative worlds, novels like Danielewski's and Vollmann's emphasize the enclosed and delimited nature of their story-worlds, and thus point beyond their material covers to the limits and problems of world-forming. They maintain a reference to our concrete world with its problematic power relations, and foreground the absence of possibilities for transcendence as a central problem of representation.

With this line of argumentation, I seek to nuance Emily Apter's statements in *Against World Literature* (2003), that subsume Vollmann's work under a category of narrative articulations she terms 'oneworldedness'.¹⁶⁵ Apter employs this term to denote works of literature that impose a view of the world as a "one-size, supranational entity" (79). In the works of authors like Pynchon, Vollmann, and DeLillo, Apter identifies this "delirious aesthetics of systematicity . . . the match between cognition and globalism that is held in place by the paranoid premise that 'everything is connected'" (72-3). 'Oneworldedness,' she goes on to insist,

adheres to an ethics of remote responsibility that refuses acknowledgement of the "butterfly effect" (the chaos theory principle that tracks how desire for a product in one part of the world may be linked to a damaged ecology in another part of the world). Oneworldedness imagines the planet as subject to "the system" and wants to disable plans of escape. . . . endorsing the idea that there are legitimate reasons to be paranoid in a world bent on civilizational self-destruction. . . . it *matches the circular form of the globe*—imagined as a *smooth surface* allowing the unimpeded flow of capital, information and language—with the tautological truism that theory is paranoia; an intellectual entrapment in logic that is mimetic of the object of analysis. (84-5; emphasis mine)

The resulting representations of the world in these novels, she concludes, form "a relatively intractable literary monoculture that travels through the world absorbing difference" (91). I do not underwrite Apter's

165 Apter later expanded upon this notion of oneworldedness in an article published in *American Literary History* 18.2, 2006.

conflation between the global realities these novels depict and the works of art themselves. After all, who would deny a novelist like Pynchon his ironic distance to the *Zeitgeist* he parodically describes? Moreover, I would not characterize the fragmented works of these postmodern authors in terms of a “smooth” aesthetics that “matches the circular form of the globe” (85). And, more important for my argument, I find that the inclusion of Vollmann in this list contradicts many of the central characteristics of his work.

As I argue below, Vollmann undeniably pays attention to the power imbalances between the US and other, less prosperous countries in a globalized context. He also foregrounds how his own writing is implicated in, and brought forth by, these global injustices. It does not necessarily follow, however, that he posits a uniform, homogeneous globality without allowing the possibility of an alternative. If there is one contemporary novelist who stands out for his belief in the transformation of the world through writing (a belief that, indeed, borders on the naïve), it is Vollmann. He has underlined numerous times the importance for contemporary literature and literary culture, especially for American authors, to accept that there is not one particular, privileged world: “Everyone’s world is no more and no less important than everyone else’s. To have as many worlds as possible that are invested with interest or meaning is a way of making that point” (Hemmingson 2009: 94). His belief in the power of literature to give meaning to (or even to remythologize) the world sets him apart from postmodern authors like David Foster Wallace and William Gibson, to whom critics compared him at an earlier stage in his career (e.g. LeClair 1996a).

An example of his non-ironic stance is the romanticized ‘originary myth’ that the author tells and retells in his work: the memory of his sister drowning when he was nine years old. Vollmann has always felt guilty for her death, since he was supposed to be watching over her, but, as he was immersed in a book, he had not been paying attention to her (Vollmann 1992: 155).¹⁶⁶ This traumatizing event, he claims, informs his mission, not only to “bear full witness” (which, by extension, explains the extraordinary volume of his work) but also to reverse this absorption of the self in a book and intervene where possible in situations of social injustice (2004a: 317). His novels continuously renegotiate the question of the responsibility of literature versus the global, as I argue below

166 The nightly reverberations of this dark episode in his life found their way into the section “Under the Grass” in *The Atlas* (1996): “Immensely long skinny leaves of fear (spider lily, *crinum asiaticum*) grew around my throat every night like thick sad trees over a lava hole where the sea comes sadly in. You rushed as a yellow skeleton into every dream. If I screamed myself awake, you waited until the long skinny leaves of sleep choked me back to you again. You came clacking and scuttling like a yellow spider until I screamed crimson tears. A package arrived from the post office of dreams and you skittered out to punish me” (104)

regarding *The Atlas*. As Madison Smart Bell puts it, Vollmann, who usually figures as a character in his own novels,

has turned his presence in his work into a declaration of engagement. Instead of entering the work to declare that it is a trick, he stands inside it as a witness—vouching for its authenticity . . . [Vollmann] has broken out of metafiction's self-reflexive squirrel-cage. (1993: 44)

In this respect, he resembles the nineteenth-century author who enters his text more than his contemporaries. I would not describe such a project as “paranoid” or as endorsing “a relatively intractable literary monoculture that travels through the world absorbing difference” (Apter 72; 91). Vollmann does not strive to over-come differences, contradictions, and disharmonies across the globe, but instead foregrounds them. If anything, we can question his work on account of its neoromantic tendencies of ‘archiving’ the female, as I argue below.

Vollmann, like Danielewski, offers new perspectives on globalization and the relation between monumental novels and the world at large. They are two of the foremost examples of authors who practice world-making in their fictional oeuvres. One way they accomplish this multiple perspective is by drawing attention to the notion of ‘scale variance,’ as explained above. As a narrative strategy, scale variance centers on the idea that the realities these novels represent change according to the distance or proximity they take in relation to these realities. I have already identified such a varied performance of close and distanced ‘readings’ of the world with respect to Knausgård's *My Struggle*. In *The Atlas* and *Only Revolutions*, a similar emphasis on scale variance is connected specifically to the worldly and the question of transnationalism. These novels subvert the pervasive metaphor of the book as world by ‘including’ an exceptionally large territory within their narratives, while at the same time problematizing the notion of ‘mastery’ over the ground they cover. Reading Vollmann together with Danielewski will help me investigate how the monumental novel can comment on global situations in a meaningful way. These works resist both the self-enclosed and all-encompassing forms that postmodernist critics discarded decades ago *and* the conflation between representation and reality that characterizes today's media-culture informed by datafication.

At the same time, Vollmann's and Danielewski's works display an awareness of the fact that the national perspective is not so easy to transcend or shake off. “[E]ven in a so-called post-national age,” as Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney remind us, “the national’ as a framework for identity and memory-making is still a powerful one” (2014: 6). Both Vollmann and Danielewski acknowledge this fact in their critical engagement with traditions of American myth-making and

their archetypal representations of the American figure abroad. Their characters are always on the run: they have to keep moving as they are enclosed in an immanent world without the transcendent promise of an outside, to recall Nancy. Neither free nor in control, they are determined by their itinerary and the spaces they inhabit. These spaces are not only geographical: they also include the book as a space. The material book functions as a container *of* their story-worlds and is contained *by* them. The book-as-world is reconfigured as a world-as-book from the characters (and by extension, author and reader) cannot escape.

Central to my argument is the innovative ways in which both authors use the materiality of the book, in order to perform experiences of inhabiting the radically immanent world of late globalization. They exploit the volumetric aspect of the book object, its three-dimensional, spatial affordances, as well as its finite character. They integrate these material characteristics of the book into their narratives, precisely to enact the experience that Nancy writes about, of inhabiting an enclosed world without a beyond, lacking a sense of orientation or external anchoring points. The characters who inhabit these book-spaces wander around without the promise of transcending their material confinements. This, however, does not culminate in a powerless acceptance of paranoia and 'oneworldedness'. The protagonists of both works are *aware* of inhabiting the book as space, and therein lies their freedom and creative impetus to create their own worlds within the confines of the book's covers. That such a project of world-making is never completely innocent, is an insight that both works of literature, each in their own way, add to Nancy's theory.

4.2 Journey to the Covers of the Earth: Vollmann Trapped Inside his Atlas

Born in 1959, Vollmann is an artist of the 1980s and 1990s, who witnessed the emergence of a radically globalized world. Even more than Bolaño, who is famous for his vagabond-like life and his wanderings across the globe, Vollmann's way of moving in the world is quite literally errant or digressive. He traverses the globe for his journalistic work and out of personal interests, chasing a promise of alterity that always recedes. These quests of the author-witness are doomed from the beginning. I will argue that their failure is caused precisely by the retreat of the beyond that Nancy has diagnosed. In the absence of possibilities for transcendence, Vollmann revives Romantic ideals that are well-intentioned but far from innocent. In his *Sehnsucht* and his archiving of female others around the globe, the author perpetuates a nineteenth-century tradition of the 'eternal feminine'. In a world without a 'beyond' or outside position, the interminable project of traveling and collecting leads to a search

that cannot be completed. Despite perpetuating problematic Romantic notions like these, his novel *The Atlas* offers new insights into the relevance of world-making in a global, digitized world. This novel is informative, precisely where it fails. Vollmann cannot shake off his male, American perspective on what he encounters and thus fails to register anything objectively—contra LeClair. His oeuvre is a meditation on the impossibility of objectively ‘recording’ a global situation, and, as such, it points to the illusory nature of ‘mastery,’ even, or rather especially, for the white American male.

4.2.1 Mapping the Unmappable

How do these concerns specifically play out in Vollmann’s novel-in-stories *The Atlas* (TA, 1996)? This novel is a logical point of departure to understand Vollmann’s writings, since it is a blueprint of almost all the themes and motives (flight, travel, escapism, moral digression, transgression, sex, violence) of his other, longer novels, as well as their aesthetic structures and preoccupation with the visual-material aspects of the book. TA engages with these themes in the relatively compressed space of 455 pages, which makes it a short-read by Vollmann’s standards. At the same time, it is the most explicitly ‘global’ in scope of all his works. TA is a collection of numerous fragments that record an American traveler’s experiences all over the world—in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Mexico, the US, Thailand, Australia, Cambodia, etcetera. Like pages in a real atlas, TA includes a Gazetteer (xvii-xxii) which gives us the exact coordinates of these places on the earth’s surface, such as ‘Resolute Bay, Cornwallis Island, Northwest Territories, Canada 74.40 N, 95.00 W’ and ‘Paris, Département Paris, Région Parisienne, France 48.52 N, 2.2o E’.

The global scope of TA is inscribed within the limited material space of the book-bound novel and, thereby, manifests itself in the form of the fragment, as in 2666. The recurrent co-presence of the global and the fragmentary in these novels is not incidental. In fact, as Ercolino argues, the form of the fragment “is the only textual system possible for a literature of global aspirations; the only textual system possible for a novel that dares to challenge the complexity of the world” (2014: 56). In a ‘Compiler’s Note’ (xv-xi), Vollmann reveals that his specific use of fragments in TA was inspired by the ‘palm-of-the-hand stories’ of the Japanese writer Yasunari Kawabata, whose novel *Snow Country* (1935-1947) likewise consists of a collection of extremely compressed miniature vignettes. Vollmann employs serialized forms in the majority of his fictional oeuvre. He uses vignettes as the building blocks for his monumental narratives in novels like *Europe Central* (2005) and *The Royal Family* (2000), which are also novels-in-stories.

In TA, as in most of Vollmann’s works, the structure of the text is an indispensable element of the meaning of the work. Therefore, it is necessary to first examine its unique composition. After a section

entitled "Opening the Book" follow twenty-six numbered chapters. At the center of the novel is a novella called "The Atlas" and, after this, another twenty-six chapters follow. This time, the chapters are numbered backwards from 26 to 1. This makes the structure of the novel symmetrical, revolving around the spine's rotational axis; an axis of convergence for both narrative structure and the materiality of the book. Thematically as well as structurally, the collection of stories is arranged like a palindrome: "the motif in the first story is taken up again in the last; the second story finds its echo in the second to last, and so on" (xvi). Thus, Vollmann emphasizes the presentation of his travels as an inherently regressive way of traversing the globe, as suggested by the Greek root of 'palindrome'; meaning *recurring*, or 'running back again.' I have addressed this theme of regression repeatedly in the scope of the present study. In my analyses of both Bolaño's "Part About the Crimes" and Knausgård's autobiographical series, I used the notion of regression to analyze the problem of instating beginnings through writing. In the palindromic structure of *TA*, the absence of beginning or end determines the form of the novel as a whole.¹⁶⁷ Rather than the "arrow-like" form of nomad travels set on discovery, conquest, or territorial expansion (as exemplified by Robinson Crusoe or Columbus), Vollmann's travels have the character of the 'voyage,' like *The Odyssey*: a journey of return and homecoming (see Glissant 1997: 12). The narrator's voyage is bound to lead him back home again, which detracts from the usual 'objective' status of the atlas as a representation of the world. It is clear from the beginning that this textual object is emphatically *Vollmann's* atlas.

Visually as well as thematically, *TA* draws our attention to the book itself as a container of narrative spaces and as an embodied cartographical metaphor. The book opens on a title page with an inserted pictorial representation of the globe, while the pivotal chapter depicts maps of the globe as projected from the North and South Poles, showing both ends of the earth's rotation axis. In the front matter are printed reproductions of plates from an old-fashioned atlas depicting Eastern and Western hemispheres and North and South poles. These images are intentionally distorted in such a way as to resemble the hemispheres of the human brain. In this respect, they reinforce the palindromic form in their mutual attachment, as well as underline the issue of scale. Moreover, these distorted hemispheres form a closed system without a shared 'outside,'

167 We can attribute the contemporary pervasiveness of creative solutions to the problem of delimiting beginnings and endings in the monumental novel to the late-global moment that Nancy writes about. This absence of beginnings and ends, in Nancy's conceptualization, directly follows from the immanence of our late-global world, marked by the absence of an outside: "any beginning could not be the only beginning or the last . . . we are in a time in which ends have been exhausted, and it is for us to decide, to begin again. We encounter the position of the undecidability of beginnings, as the singular plural existences of the world, stand in relation to creation as "sovereign"" (1997: 24; 26).

suggesting it is as impossible to move outside one's own brain, as it is to step outside of the atlas. In the tradition of tabular texts such as George Perec's *Life: A User's Manual* (1978) and Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), *TA* spatializes information (see Vandendorpe 2009: 22-7). Aptly, Vollmann informs the reader that "[w]hat you hold ... is but a piecemeal atlas of the world I think in" (xv).

These words, combined with the distorted, brain-shaped images of hemispheres, are suggestive of the idiosyncratic nature and deformations inherent to Vollmann's and, by extension, all acts of mapping. This insight corresponds to assessments made by cultural geographers (e.g. Edney 1990; Pinder 1996) who have argued for the subjectivity and limited perspective of cartography. After all, different maps of the same territory often contradict each other, and the selection of a map projection entails a choice among competing interests, which inevitably implies a point of view (Wood and Fels 1992: 60). The world is the ultimate idea of the mathematical sublime, because it is too encompassing to be captured in a representation. Indeed, it envelops its representers. Any representation of it is thus necessarily a failed attempt, marked by gaps and blind spots. Therefore, maps should be 'read' as representations of "the culture that produces them as much as they are a representation of a section of the earth or activities upon it" (MacEachren, 1995: 10).

Displaying an awareness of these considerations in its paratext, Vollmann's novel, while emulating the atlas (the all-encompassing form par excellence), subverts its claims to 'total representation' in its very form. Through this form, a sense of (limited) perspective is emphasized from the beginning through an insistence on Vollmann's subjective viewpoint of his atlas, as well as in its fragmentary building blocks. The subjective 'coloring' of Vollmann's writing leads to certain problematic aspects of his work, that I now proceed to explore.

4.2.2 The Eternal Feminine

In Vollmann's writing, the romantic experience of *Sehnsucht* as an infinite longing directly relates to the becoming-global of the world. The fragmentary in *TA*, as in *2666*, goes hand in hand with digression; both in terms of movement and of narration. Even though, as I argue in the next section, Vollmann's journeys are framed by national boundaries (the east and west coasts of his home country), the travels contained within them are erratic. Their itinerary is without apparent logic and their order non-chronological. The journeys reflect a movement of ceaseless meandering without destination. In this sense, Vollmann's voyages relate to what Nancy describes as the movement adequate to a plane of immanence, an aimless, meandering "wandering from one end [of the planet] to the other" (1997: 43). Where there is no beginning or end to the world, there is no goal or *telos* grounded in an outside of the world, and movement becomes purposeless. This way of moving through the world resembles

the pacing back and fro that one typically tends to do in a prison-cell or waiting room. The novel's text, like the voyage it depicts, is not linear: it is not meant to be read all the way through. Vollmann encourages his reader to "keep [the book] by you as a pillow-book, reading through it in no particular order, skipping the tales you find tedious" (xv). Thus, a digressive way of reading is promoted to match both Vollmann's unsystematic manner of traversing the planet and the skips and breaks of his narration.

During these travels, the narrator visits typically masculine settings like warzones, brothels, bars, boxing rings, and prisons. His travels are motivated by a wish to 'capture' all that is different and exotic (a desire that aligns him with American expansionist traditions). His oeuvre is marked by a compulsion to witness and register 'everything'.¹⁶⁸ To this end he collects and archives the stories of those he encounters. In *TA*, he tells of those who suffer under colonialism and globalization: women sold in Kenya, war victims in Cambodia, colonized peoples in Australia and the Americas. He reports bullfights, violence, and his visits to prostitutes. The travels are seemingly endless because of the narrator's continuous departures: "He wanted to see the world, that was all. He wanted to know and love the entire atlas" (224). 'Comprehension' of the globe in an all-encompassing representation, however, is impossible. As Nancy writes, this would imply a position outside of the world from which to map this world. The world manifests itself as excess to representation, escapes "all horizons of calculability (in opposition to the logic of economic and technologic globalization)" (Raffoul and Pettigrew 2007: 8). Unable to trace an orb around the globe, Vollmann applies the principle of *addition*, thus creating his own world as a process in expansion. Rather than encompass the globe with his Atlas, he traverses it and makes a list of what he encounters that borders on the infinite.

But most of all, he 'collects' the female objects of his affection¹⁶⁹ and

168 This need to witness all is evidenced by Vollmann's obsession with documentation. He offers extensive appendices of endnotes and sources, underlining the author's idea of the writer as "a recording instrument" (Vollmann 1989: 3) and his wish to "bear FULL witness" (Vollmann 2004a: 317) to his subject. As LeClair writes, "[w]ith brutal efficiency we are shown what underwrites [Vollmann's] pathological concern with ocular proof, his need to see everything with his own eyes, however impractical or impracticable it may be for him to do it" (1996: 41). The extraordinary volume of his oeuvre is a direct consequence of this self-imposed mission to bear witness.

169 LeClair, in his review of *TA*, causally links this practice of 'collecting' women all over the world to Vollmann's youth trauma, "all his 'girls' substituting for his dead sister" (1996: 74). And indeed, this connection is at least hinted at in *The Atlas*: "He showed me a binder comprising color glossies of Chinese prostitutes, each woman smiling beside a shiny red car, each glossy professionally mounted onto ivory cardboard. I looked at every page, but my sister was not there . . . I realized that everything I had done was for nothing, that no matter how many young girls I saved I could never undo or appease" (107-08).

chronicles his experiences with women around the globe. He repeatedly attempts to 'save' these women. This is literally the case in the chapter "No Reason to Cry," where he gives a fictionalized account of his (real-life) experience of rescuing a child prostitute in Thailand. In a larger, more figurative sense, this problematic wish to record the female other is a consistent drive behind Vollmann's writing. Like Knausgård, who sought to preserve his former girlfriends through writing, and like Bolaño, who created a 'database' of female murder victims, Vollmann does not compress and amalgamate these women he encounters during his travels. Again, the effect is more akin to the paradigmatic ordering principles of the database than the syntagmatic structures of narrativity, more inclusive than selective. In *TA*, there's room for all: "could there be any whose recollection he'd ever fail to praise? Their tears and reproaches, silences, farewells, laughter and whispered words were marked on the atlas pages like nations" (245-46).

It is a striking reoccurrence within these novels that an immanent, global, and digitalized world seems to elicit from all these writers an urge to collect alterity in the guise of the female. With this gesture, these authors place themselves in the nineteenth-century tradition of the 'Eternal Feminine' (das *Ewig-Weibliche*), the eternal principle symbolized by woman as famously described by Goethe at the end of the second book of *Faust* (1808). This principle presents woman (from prostitute to angelic virgin) in the role of intermediary between the divine and the earthly. For Goethe, 'woman' symbolized pure contemplation, in contrast to masculine action. The inexpressible is thus symbolically rendered present through the female figure as an immutable concept, as a void (resembling a womb) for the male subject to escape in (Gilbert and Gubar 1979: 599). We should be wary of this aspect of the past-oriented dimension of literary monumentalism. The novels under study refer back to this tradition in their seemingly endless lists of females, with the important difference that in a world without a metaphysical beyond and the possibility of transcendence, theirs is an eternal feminine without the compression of symbolic representations. The result is an interminable structure, gender essentialism without a distilled essence. In a world without beginning and end, the eternal feminine becomes truly eternal through seriality.

This Romantic ideal manifests itself in *TA* as an ideology of expansion and the nostalgia of open space:

In pioneer days it must have been that way and more,
a man and a woman travelling on together, helping
one another, needing each other, not knowing whether
they'd make it. These days there seemed no penalty for
not being sure. The atlas opened, easy pages lay ahead.
(248-49)

The narrator deplures how easy and risk-free it has become to traverse the globe, since it diminishes the sense of adventure in traveling. The center-story that carries the same name as the novel most clearly describes such a fantasy of open space. After having traveled through regions Pnom Penh and Sarajewo, characterized by conflict and complex, messy human relations, Vollmann's narrator expects to find uncharted territory in the Arctic region, which is described as space of potentiality: "I seemed to see nothing but solidified space without a predicate. It was a blank space of all possibilities, not excluding loveliness and terror" (237). Vollmann envisions this region as an opportunity to vanish from the face of the earth: "he . . . was going to disappear. He was going to travel to the world's edge (which lies in Canada), and he was happy" (207). He arrives at Ellesmere Island in what used to be Canada's Northwest Territories, but is now Nunavut. Significantly, this place is at the farthest Northern point of Canada, close to the magnetic North Pole. The narrator has arrived at the territory depicted on the aforementioned maps printed at the axis of the book. He has finally traversed the globe and reached the limit of the world in Nancy's meaning of "[s]ense as navigation to (or on) the confines of space" (1997: 40).

This journey to the limits, however, does not grant the expected transgression, let alone the transcendence that Vollmann seeks. As Nancy insists, in a globalized world it is no longer possible to "cross over" the earth (2007: 7). The narrator longs for the landscape as described in Kawabata's *Snow Country*. In this novel, which inspired *TA*, a setting of seemingly infinite snowy plains signals

the end of this world and the beginning of another, the country of pure mountains of sunset crystal which all tunnels are supposed to lead to, the zone of that uncanny whiteness hymned by Poe and Melville, the pole of transcendence. (251)

Undifferentiated, lacking contours or markers, Kawabata's blinding white landscape offers a suggestion of the Burkean "artificial infinity" that "impress[es] the imagination with an idea of their progress beyond [its] actual limits" (Burke 1990: II: IX, 68). Such an experience, however, has become unattainable in a global world. Even this illusion of the infinite has vanished from Vollmann's globe: "He gazed at Fuji's dull snow far above so many dull white apartments and could not see any beauty" (*Ibid.*). To his detriment, the once-open plains of Kawabata's sublime snow country are now the site of so many white apartment buildings. Significantly, the sublime experience sought after is not a first-hand memory or knowledge but is mediated by Kawabata's book. One could even wonder (a possibility that Nancy does not entertain) whether this mourning of transcendence is indeed typical of late globalization, or

if it is not in fact a much older sensibility. It manifests itself as a romantic longing par excellence, which was never meant to be fulfilled.

With this disappointment, Vollmann's alter ego loses faith in the ability to reach new grounds and find unexplored spaces: "Everywhere he went, he'd say to himself: there's nothing for me here anymore. No more nowhere nobody" (202). Having "used up every place now" (202). He realizes that only death would allow him an escape from the all-encompassing Atlas. The poetic wish to exit the grid results in an all-too-real (though blatantly romanticized) near-death experience from freezing.¹⁷⁰ Since the world "never crosses over these edges to occupy a place overlooking itself" (Nancy 2007: 43), leaving this world can only mean no longer being in any world: it is to stop existing.

Vollmann imagines this ultimate alterity, which harbors a last possibility of escape through transcendence for his narrator (a possibility that never materializes), in the form of a woman.¹⁷¹ Thus in "The Atlas," he configures the icy landscape as the Native American Willow Lady:

The atlas closed. Inside, each page became progressively more white and warm.

Willow Lady rolled on top of him and took him in her arms. She rocked him to sleep. No more nowhere nobody. . . . He lay at the center from which the world rotated round and round and round. (265)

Such identifications of (open) space as female, with the problematic ideologies of subjugation and objectification that come with them, are often seen as typical for US discourse. The idea of geographical space as "wild, untamed, virgin, needing mastery and manifest destiny to guide it" is central to popular imaginings of the American West (Flanagan 2000: 77). We can understand Vollmann's female personifications of spaces, landscapes and nations throughout his oeuvre as part of both this American tradition of imperialism and the aforementioned nineteenth century gender essentialism.

170 While researching *The Rifles* (1994), the sixth volume in the *Seven Dreams* series, which concerns John Franklin's doomed quest to find the Northwest Passage, Vollmann (on assignment from *Esquire*) spent two weeks at an abandoned weather station at the magnetic North Pole and almost froze to death. In the novel he describes the extreme weather and hallucinations he experienced due to lack of sleep and proper food: "Every night now he wondered if he would live until morning" (320).

171 In *Europe Central* (2005), for instance, he imagines Europe as female, and embodied by the character Elena Konstantinovskaya: "Europe is Elena" (228). Russia is personified by the peasant girl and martyr Zoya: "yes, she'd died a virgin but she was now literally the Motherland! . . . between her breasts . . . lay the valley of perfect whiteness and smoothness" (415).

This analysis clarifies how processes of globalization in *TA* cause similar expressions of romantic longing as the ones occasioned by a sublime of data overload. Vollmann's work becomes informative where his expansionist quests in these spaces invariably fail. The relations between people in remote parts of the world remain fragmentary, and the Romantic unity that Vollmann seeks is unattainable. Otherness, in the final analysis, cannot be contained. In what follows, I will show how the author employs the spatialized metaphor of the atlas as a commodified world to bring across the illusory sense of true mastery over the world and the 'objects' he collects. Indeed, he is as much contained by the world-as-book as these objects are. Vollmann performs the failure of mastery and control through writing and map making. He does so by inscribing himself in certain long-standing traditions of representation that are typically 'American,' as I explain in the next subsection.

4.2.3 The archetypal American abroad

In this sub-section, I analyze how Vollmann subverts the would-be totalizing and 'objective' cultural form of the atlas, by inscribing it in American traditions. But first, I need to shortly outline how the atlas' status of objectivity has been critiqued in map making theory. The conception of the atlas that Vollmann hints at in quotations like the one I reproduced above ("easy pages lay ahead," 294), is a familiar representation of the world reduced to a portable object. We can open it on any page we want to, we can hover above and beyond it. Just like the chronicler who records what he sees, the maker of maps seeks to exert control over his surroundings. As an observer of space, this subject remains unobserved and disembodied, outside the controlling gaze (Farman 2010: 81). This is why, in *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard specifically chooses the example of the map to exemplify his famous postmodern critique of representation ("The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it," 1994: 1). In many ways the atlas is the ultimate representation of control over the world. Arguably, no other mode of representation has been taken to be as neutral and objective (Craib 2000: 8).

The perceived neutrality and objectivity of mapping practices, however, are illusory. There is a long-standing awareness of the insufficiency and provisional character of maps when it comes to representing the world. Karen Barad reminds us that "[p]ractices of knowing and being are not isolatable, but rather they are mutually implicated. We do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world; we know because "we" are of the world" (2003: 829). In other words, the objects of our maps, charts, and calculations are fully entangled with these measurements themselves. Lefebvre (1991) states that the idea that maps visualize the world objectively derives from a misunderstanding of the nature of space. When space is understood as a container, it seems to causally

imply a pre-existing void. Lefebvre urges us instead to understand space as actively produced by map makers through their representations (170). The world is not 'out there' to be grasped from an outside position.

In Vollmann's atlas, these insights come to the fore in its emphatic inscription of an American outlook on the world, a point of view he cannot escape. That the partial, biased perspective of the map or the atlas is to an important extent a *national* perspective can be derived from the beginning and end of the novel. Even though the palindromic structure of the book causes a regression that precludes any determinate beginnings and endings, the geographic parameters of *TA* are clearly inscribed within the material space of the book. These parameters are reinforced by one of the major structural features of the codex: *finitude*. The opening section, "Opening the Book," is set at Grand Central Station, New York City. The closing section, called "Closing the Book," is set at another train station in Sacramento, California. As a framing device, these sections indicate a movement from the east to the west coast, which is the traditional route of colonists associated with the American Manifest Destiny. It is the route of expansion, imperialism, and the search for freedom. This pilgrimage embodied the physical and spiritual movement from the limiting culture of the East (of Europe and the 'Old World') to the future: the vast, open plains of the frontier. "The east of my youth and the west of my future," as Dean Moriarty says in Kerouac's *On the Road* (2000: 15).¹⁷²

Choosing these specific locations to frame his cosmopolitan journeys, Vollmann makes a gesture of implicating himself in this tradition. The myth of the frontier revolves around the desire to escape (physical and psychological) limitations. Clearly, Vollmann's going 'on the road' is likewise motivated by a wish to be free from, and unrestrained by, societal norms.¹⁷³ At the same time, this gesture is subverted from the beginning, precisely because his journeys are 'bound' between these parameters, emphasizing the unmistakably American character of his quest. This framing foreshadows the incapacity, reflected in his narration, to shake off the US-centered nature of his experiences all over the globe. This local yet mobile point of view already puts the possibility of 'mastering' the globe – through travel *or* through writing – into question.

172 The symbolic movement to the West also serves as the background to the journey of the Joads family in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). To mention one more example, Mark Twain's *Roughing It* from 1872 describes the 'gold rush' and the wild, lawless society that was founded in its wake.

173 Vollmann is known for his exasperation with overly restraining social norms. In an interview he exclaims: "Everything that my grandfather used to do for fun is now illegal. People are now discouraged from doing everything my father used to do. We're ruled by safety nazis [sic] and safety monkeys. How nice it is to briefly escape them and to have the illusion of a little personal freedom" (Seaman 2007). In his book about hopping freight trains, *Riding Toward Everywhere* (2008), the author repeatedly expresses his longing to live in a less limiting time and place, as denoted by the totalizing 'everywhere' of the title.

Moreover, *TA* imaginatively conveys the aforementioned insights on the subject of mapping by portraying the subjectivity of the traveler-cartographer as emergent *in* this world in relation to actual, geographical others, and depicting how this figure is 'othered' himself. As Michelle Hardesty notes in reference to *An Afghanistan Picture Show* (1992), Vollmann's self-representations (here, by way of his narrator) are "invested in the symbol and myth of the American character, and especially the American character abroad" (2009: 101). Parodically modeled after the characters of Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway, the author-characters in Vollmann's oeuvre take on an allegorical significance, making their achievements and stupidities resonate with those of their nation. Unlike these more iconic representations of American masculinity, however, the stupidities of Vollmann's protagonists by far outnumber their achievements. The emphasis, as Hardesty writes, lies on failure: "Vollmann's narrator is the prototypical American abroad as a well-intentioned failure, a character that resonates with the contemporary imagination of U.S. foreign relations" (104).

This persona enables Vollmann to write about his encounters with geographical others without glossing over or de-emphasizing the ongoing, asymmetrical global power relations that his writing perpetuates and to which it contributes. Instead of "Disneyfying" global relations (Damrosch 2003: 10), he foregrounds this problematic aspect of his world-making. Despite his (comparative) wealth and the relative ease with which he is able to move across the globe, Vollmann's mapmaker is all but free or unobserved. Everywhere he goes, he meets numerous actual, concrete others. In Canada's Northwest Territories, he joins native hunters who are hunting after walrus, and is faced with a hostile attitude: "The boy who hated white people sat sullenly with his back turned toward me . . . I was only allowed along because I had paid three hundred dollars" (23). At other times, these others look at him and see the possibility of earning money: "Looking up at his giant blinking eye, little girls in red and yellow garbasha's stood and tried to sell him packs of cigarettes" (152). Trapped inside the atlas, he is an object of gazes that convey feelings of resentment and hopes of financial benefit.

Vollmann meticulously keeps track of the amount of dollars he pays prostitutes for their stories ("baht": about US \$40 in 1993. About what an all-night girl might expect to receive" (393). In their acknowledgement of the transaction as the story's condition of possibility, these fragments draw attention to the intersection of two meanings of the term 'account'. As Brooks has pointed out, in 'account' the narrative and the financial collide. In the life of a prostitute, especially, "the accounting gives something to recount, money and story flow from the same nights of sexual exchange" (1984: 163). In Vollmann's oeuvre, then, money is yet another way of quantifying narrative. Although the narrator of *TA* hungers after a connection with others, all his relations to global others

are mediated by money. Sometimes this is literally the case: "As long as he could keep dancing with her (and paying to dance), she'd still be his" (85). Other times, this inequality is caused by the fact that his money gives him the freedom to leave whenever he wants, whereas the natives do not have this choice: "My guilt about being free to leave has built a silence over time that drowned what she actually said" (11). Paradoxically, the globalized world in its 'openness' is a prison for him, causing loneliness, isolation, and exclusion.

TA thus offers a meditation on the type of ethical relationship that Brown calls 'horizontal ethics,' of border-crossing and encountering the geographic other (2008: 53). Unlike Google's Street View, which is marked by an "asymmetry of the gaze" (Vaidhyanathan 2011: 103),¹⁷⁴ these others are able to *return* his gaze, and to respond in their own ways to the masculine subjectivity of this well-meaning 'ugly American'. Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet have asked: "In fleeing everything, how can we avoid reconstituting both our country of origin and our formations of power, our intoxicants, our psychoanalyses and our mummies and daddies?" (1987: 29). Vollmann's narrator would answer that this is impossible. He cannot shake off his outward 'white American-ness' any more than he can transcend his limited, Western perspective on the globe. These aspects of his subjectivity shape his encounters with others in a profound way. The American subjectivity that emanates from these fragments is not a free, autonomous individual, but only an effect of frictions and asymmetrical (economic) relations with others in different parts of the world.

Vollmann's work thus concretizes and fills in Nancy's general assessment of the lack of the beyond in late globalization. Trapped in his limited American perspective, his narrator must keep moving without the meaningful promise of an outside to the world. This plight was also the fate of the character Amalfitano in *2666*, with the important difference that the latter's wanderings were caused by exile, carrying connotations of unwelcomeness or persecution. Vollmann's narrator experiences the same impetus to remain in motion, but his restlessness is caused by markedly different factors. Digression is here specifically connected to being American. He is 'on the move' precisely because the political and economic influence of the US is global, and thus cannot be escaped. Ironically, an important part of the American Dream lies in rebirth through traveling, the idea that one can simply hit the road, shake off the past and become whoever one wants to be (see Fiedler

174 This asymmetry, Vaidhyanathan argues in *The Googlization of Everything*, is the main problem with Google Street View: "A person walking down the street peering into residents' yards would be watched right back by offended residents, who would consider calling the police to report such dangerous and antisocial behavior. But with Google Street View, the residents can't see or know who is peeping" (103)

1960: 23-38). Deleuze and Parnet see the corresponding rootlessness of Anglo-American literature as one of its assets (and in fact the source of its superiority over, for instance, French literature):

One only discovers worlds through a long, broken flight. In [American literature] everything is departure, becoming, passage, leap, daemon, relationship with the outside. . . . American literature operates according to geographical lines: the flight towards the West, the discovery that the true East is in the West, the sense of the frontiers as something to cross, to push back, to go beyond. The becoming is geographical. (1987: 27-8)

TA nuances this idea of rootlessness and the related connotations of freedom and autonomy attached to the cultural identity of the American. Whereas Vollmann's relative wealth and inborn restlessness allow him to expand his geographical horizon, at the same time it is precisely his 'Americanness' that prevents him from re-writing himself. The reader soon realizes that the atlas is gaining mastery over its owner, the travelling narrator, instead of the other way around. Far from any position of control, Vollmann's wandering narrator is trapped inside the atlas.

This is not 'just' a metaphor: his narrator and alter ego at several points reveals an awareness of the material book that contains him and that he cannot move beyond. The narrator's predicament of being caught inside the book is literalized in a chapter called "Outside and Inside," which allegorizes the mechanisms of power and inequality that underlie the production of this monumental collection on a global scope. In a bookstore, a male customer is leafing through the pages of "a thirty-eight color picture book printed on paper as smooth as a virgin's thigh" (394) when outside a fight breaks out. A male panhandler smashes his female adversary through the bookstore window. Here, boundaries are crossed: it is the violent outside world intruding in the seemingly innocent inner world of books. The customer, trying to help the woman, "opened his book and invited her in . . . Spangles of blood struck the pages like a mystery rain, becoming words which had never existed before" (395). Her blood transgresses the boundaries of the book in yet another collapse of distinctions between outside and inside. The male character, with the best of intentions, tries to save the oppressed female other by 'collecting' her in his book, precisely as Vollmann does in his writing. This gesture, of course, has the disastrous side-effect of objectifying her and limiting her freedom. By literalizing this process of objectification, "Inside and Outside" describes a problematic dimension of *TA*, and indeed of Vollmann's oeuvre as a whole. In archiving the

stories of the marginalized, informed by the author's mission of 'saving' his sister by witnessing and recording 'everything,' his oeuvre objectifies the other. This story makes this ideological underpinning explicit. For all Vollmann's good intentions, he perpetuates existing power imbalances through his writing.

And yet, it is possible to derive from this novel a corrective to Leclair's theory, as well as ambitions of literary 'totalization'. After all, Vollmann's narrator is by no means in a position of control or mastery over his objects of representation, because he himself is just as much part of his atlas. As we have seen, the traveler-character himself does not maintain a position outside of the book. He, too, is encapsulated in the world-as-book and is aware of this predicament:

Where is the book you put me in? asked the woman.
This is the atlas, he said. This is the book. — And he bent down
and touched the pavement. He knew that everything was set upon a
single page.
Open the book, she said weakly.
It's open already.
Where am I, then? Am I inside or outside?
I don't know, he murmured, suddenly resentful. I don't know
where I am anymore, either. I lost my freedom because of you.
(399)

This book-space does not allow him the safety of the unobserved gaze. Instead of hovering above the book as a prototypical mapmaker, he is caught in an intermediate space in which both he and the woman are recorded in, and by, the (material) atlas. Thus, Vollmann uses the form of the book as a navigable space and material carrier to unmask as illusory the ideal of a position of overview and of objective representation of the world.

We have seen that Vollmann's writing project is informed by two traditions that render it problematic from an ideological viewpoint: nineteenth-century ideas of the eternal feminine and American expansionism. Even though we should be critical of this regressive side, because of its failure to capture alterity, his work also brings new insights that help envision ways the monumental novel expose ideals of mastery as illusory. At the same time, even if this text deflates or problematizes assumptions concerning (globalized) mastery, it does not in any way 'solve' the issue of mastery or neutralize the more problematic aspects of Vollmann's writing. Yey, even if we can and should be wary of the neoromantic aspects of his writing, Vollmann's insight that we are objects as much as creators of our own representations of the world, rules out Apter's 'oneworldedness,' since it posits by definition a multiplicity of worlds. The narrator makes this point unambiguously:

“One traveller may rule (or be slave to) many, many worlds” (233).¹⁷⁵ In its foregrounding of both spatial and narrative digressions, *TA* points to the material book as a tabular and ‘navigable’ narrative space. Such a conceptualization of narrative space, which refers back to the epic as well as brings to mind adventurous computer games of the present (Manovich 2001: 244-72), is taken further in Danielewski’s *Only Revolutions*, to which I will now turn.

4.3 Around the World in 360 Pages: *Only Revolutions* as a Non-totalizable Totality

In this section I analyze Danielewski’s *Only Revolutions* (*OR*) in its unique reconfigurations of the relation between the monumental novel and the global. Like *TA*, this novel covers an exceptionally large territory, while at the same time problematizing notions of ‘mastery’ and resisting the idea of the novel (and the self) as a perfectly self-enclosed form. *OR* achieves this in large part through its formal-material aspect, as a textual system that is at once complete in itself and open to the world, or, as I will characterize this form with Nancy: a non-totalizable totality.

OR tells the story of Hailey and Sam through chiasmically juxtaposed stream-of-consciousness monologues. After falling in love at first sight, these perpetual sixteen-year-olds embark upon a road trip through time and space, across the US and its history. The characters flee from their separated and isolated worlds by creating a shared world through endless narration, seeking freedom and transcendence in their romantic unification: the book’s subtitle reads “The Democracy of Two, Set Out & Chronologically Arranged.” These monologues are narrated from opposite ends of the text.¹⁷⁶

Through this unusual composition of the page, Danielewski foregrounds the three-dimensionality of the book as meaningful and even indispensable to the narrative. The author has claimed that, with this experimental novel, he wanted to create a book that cannot exist online, to investigate what books do that digital media cannot do: “I think that’s the bar that the Internet is driving towards: how to further emphasize what is different and exceptional about books” (qtd. in Cottrell 2011).¹⁷⁷

175 Further on, the same point is revisited: “cannot we make our own planets wherever we go, with even our own idées fixes or lunar satellites to accompany us in orbits of measurable eccentricity?” (253).

176 References to the text will henceforth start with ‘H’ or ‘S’ followed by a page number, to indicate the narrator of the particular citation.

177 At the same time, the author acknowledges that this book could not have been made without the Internet. See Pressman 2014: 170-1.

As a starting point, I describe the complex spatial architecture of this novel.

In *OR*, everything revolves in circles. The signs 8 and II (8 pages, 2 characters), as well as their tilted variants ∞ and $=$ (infinity and equality), recur throughout the book. The first letters of every eighth page together form an infinite loop that goes '...Sam and Hailey and Sam and Hailey...'. The book consists of 360 pages, each of which contains 360 words;¹⁷⁸ the page numbers are enclosed in circles that revolve if you flip the pages. This circular structure also comes back in the bodily gestures of reading. In *OR*, each half of the story is narrated in portions of eight pages. The reader has to decide on which end to begin, and to turn the book over and around periodically for the narrative to unfold. Alternatively, she can choose to read one narrative in a linear fashion, all the way to the end, and then go on with the beginning of the other one. It is recommended to handle the book like a steering wheel turning the stories together. Aptly, the ancient Greek word *kybernetikos*, which refers to the art of steering, forms the etymological basis for 'cybernetics'. Thus, Manovich writes, the notion of 'navigable space' lies at the origin of the computer era (2001: 7). As a text that needs to be bodily navigated and traversed, *OR* is certainly linked to these developments. Following from its configuration, reading the book necessitates a material 360° revolution of the object.

Through all these circles on different scales, Danielewski obviously repudiates the linearity of the conventional novel. Indeed, *OR* is interminable in a far more radical sense than *2666*, *My Struggle*, and *TA*. The novel's form is another instance of the Burkean artificial infinite, since the circle is without beginning and end, or rather, its end is its beginning. The end of Sam's story implies the beginning of Hailey's story (in 1963), whose end (in 2063) in turn implies a return to the beginning of Sam's (in 1863). This lends the narrative the form of a Möbius strip, a story loop with an impossible twist: both versions end with the death of the other character. The final pages of each half (359-60) prompt us to

178 With its omnipresent circles and the exact number of 360 words on each page, *OR* partakes in a tradition of writing under constraint, of which the experiments of the Oulipo movement (*Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*) are famous instances. This was a collective of writers and mathematicians (notably, Georges Perec and Italo Calvino) founded in 1960 by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais, who experimented with the construction of new patterns and structures for literature through severe, self-imposed constraints. The group constructed texts according to lipograms and palindromes, and developed textual methods based on mathematical problems, such as the 'knight's tour' of the chessboard. Queneau's *Cent Mille Millions de Poèmes*, to give just one example, is inspired by picture books for children with each page cut into horizontal strips that the reader can turn around independently, allowing varied combinations of picture. Queneau's book contains ten sonnets, each on a page that is split into 14 strips, one per line. The author estimated it would take a reader approximately 200 million years to read all possible combinations. With its exact number of 360 words per page and 360 pages per protagonist, *OR* can be said to build on this tradition.

start over at the other end, so the reading, like the Möbius strip, has no logical ending. By adopting this form, *OR* enacts the distinctive circular structure of the modern road narrative, where “[t]ime spent means ground covered” (Ganser, Pühringer and Rheindorf 2006: 3), but where, in the end, one often finds oneself back at the beginning. This circular quality, conventionally working at the story level of the road novel, here comprises the entire material composition of the text: the reading is structured by the sensory space in which the text is inscribed. The circle, like Vollmann’s palindrome, forebodes the *inevitability of return*.¹⁷⁹ Hailey and Sam’s movements across the world, like those of Vollmann’s narrator, are regressive, always ‘running back again’. By giving his novel the structure of a Möbius strip, Danielewski has found another, yet more radical way of (provisionally) overcoming not only the linearity of prose narrative, but also the spatial finitude of the codex.¹⁸⁰

This sensory space of the book is foregrounded as a three-dimensional, chiasmic space. Everything that happens is mirrored on the other side as the narratives gradually and literally get closer to each other until they meet and unite, only to be separated again. The middle pages (180-81) function as the axis of symmetry around which all these mirrors revolve. Here, the two monologues become identical, rendering a state of perfect balance between Hailey and Sam, after which they move further apart again. For each page, there are three counterpoints with corresponding lines: for instance Hailey’s first page (H1) is counterpointed with the symmetric page in her own narrative (H360), the same page in Sam’s narrative (S1), and the symmetric page in Sam’s narrative (S360, printed upside down on the same page). This makes the book into a chiasmic space, a space constituted by mirrors and parallels. The chiasm, as Lyotard explains,

179 This is already reflected in the characters’ opening words: “Samsara!” connotes not only drifting or migration, but also reincarnation and transmigration, as Philip Leonard points out; and “Haloes! Haleskarth!” besides transcendence and disembodiment, promises circularity and recurrence (2013: 56).

180 As an interminable structure, circularity is even more efficient than digression. Hence in “The Garden of Forking Paths,” before Borges’s scholar discovers the principle of Ts’ui Pen’s bifurcating novel, he imagines infinite textuality as cyclical, a volume whose last pages are the same as the first (97). Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (1939) is such a text, whose unfinished sentence on its last page resumes on its first page, and which therefore continues indefinitely. Other variants on this structure include Julio Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* (1963/7) and John Barth’s minimalist Möbius-narrative “Frame- Tale” from *Lost in the Funhouse*: “Once upon a time there was a story that began /once upon a time there was a story that began,” etcetera. This last example also incorporates the materiality of paper in its structure. It is printed along a dotted line and the reader is encouraged to cut the strips of text with paper and glue them together in the form of a Möbius strip. Of course the difference with *OR* is that Barthes’ is a minimalist story, whereas Danielewski’s structure encapsulates two centuries of world history. As with Borges and Bolaño, the difference is quantitative and lies in scale: in this case one sentence versus two times 360 pages.

introduces in the course of the text a depth that is not of pure signification, but that conceals and signals a kind of excess of meaning. The figure of the chiasm gives to this meaning – situated on the side of explicit signification, and which exceeds it – the form of the mirror, and therefore inspires a feeling of reflection, the same set of elements repeated, but reversed. (Lyotard 2010: 70–1)

Lyotard writes of the chiasm as a rhetorical figure of the ab-ba variety, and thus of a depth as an excess of meaning. In *OR*, however, the chiasmic space is literal, its depth material. The road novel's element of flight and movement begets a whole new dimension. Resulting from the structure of the chiasm, the visual space of *OR* is at once a two- and three-dimensional space.

I have described these formal and material elements of the Möbius-strip and the chiasm at some length because, as I will show in what follows, they have far-reaching consequences for the relation between the world and the book that contains that world as configured I *OR*. These consequences start when we pick up the book to begin reading. Choosing how to read *OR* entails an ethical dilemma. This follows from the fact that Sam and Hailey live in different times. Reading one story after another in a linear fashion is an act that produces interlinked, twinned stories of a linear progression from youth to death, with each a duration of four seasons and one hundred years. This is a responsible reading that performs a 'worlding' of the text and brings historical consciousness into the narration; yet, it is also a demythologizing act of reading that splits Sam and Hailey apart. The alternative, cyclical reading, by contrast, is a romantic act that allows them their 'being-with' or 'being-in-common,' sharing a world. This strategy, however, is informed by a selective historical amnesia and also disregards the happenings elsewhere in the world (it is no coincidence that both these faults are often attributed to the US). Either way, the reader is implicated, made complicit.

This implication and inclusion of the reader in the novel is the central point of my analysis. After all, a road novel that must be steered, manually navigated and thus performed makes the reader an integral element of the functioning of the text. In this respect, *OR* is an instance of what Espen Aarseth (1997) has called 'ergodic literature,' which requires an effort on the reader's part to traverse the text. In this case, the reader needs to handle the novel to weave a story out of it, to experience the unfolding of the narrative. As Leonard Philip describes this interaction, *OR* "folds readers into its pages" (2013: 145). As I will argue in what follows, *OR* might seem like a self-enclosed system due to its circular composition, but it also opens to the outside: book and world bleed into each other to form a non-totalizable totality.

In order to work up to this point, however, I first need to investigate how this novel creates a complex story-world in which the national and the global are constantly tipping over into each other. I will start with the national: like *TA, OR* inscribes itself specifically in the American cultural imaginary, displaying a number of narrative- and mythological tropes that are deemed typical for American literature.

4.3.1 “Allmighty Sixteen and Freeeeeeee”: The American Dream

A first element that situates *OR* in American traditions of representation is its conceptualization of the novel as a navigable space. Hailey and Sam traverse the globe in an assortment of cars; the names of the cities they travel past are posted on each page like road signs. In this respect, theirs are ‘narratives’ in the original meaning of the ancient Greek word ‘diegesis’. Narrative, in this traditional sense, “establishes an itinerary (it ‘guides’) and it passes through (it ‘transgresses’)” (De Certeau 1984: 129). In its original meaning, narration *spatializes* experience: it carves out what Manovich calls a ‘navigable space’ (2001: 244). As Jessica Pressmann analyzes *OR*’s unique narrative and navigable space:

The intricate page-design produces a constantly shifting perspective that mirrors the movement of Sam and Hailey as they cross the terrain of the United States. Moving through the pages of this book is like moving through a physical landscape, and the effect draws attention to the work’s mediality. (2014: 160)

The theme of spatial exploration, central to *OR*, typifies an American mythology of the individual who discovers his identity by moving outward, exploring and discovering the outside world.¹⁸¹

At the novel’s dual beginnings, the characters find themselves alone (“allone,” in Danielewski’s spelling) in a vast and unknown space. Fittingly, they begin and end their adventures on foot, traversing a romanticized wilderness evocative of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s State of Nature, not yet compromised by cultural influences. In American mythology, this landscape stands for authenticity and freedom, a place where one can (re)discover one’s ‘true’ self. This wilderness in which they find themselves, though seemingly unpopulated, is unmistakably an American landscape. We can conclude this from the species of flora and fauna that they mention, including bald eagles, boreal toads, bighorn

181 Manovich contrasts this external directionality of the American novel to European literature, which is typically more intended toward the psychological, the ‘inward’ (27). Similar generalizations are made by Fiedler (1960: xvii-xxxiv) and Deleuze and Parnet (1987: 27-56). Because of its outward nature, Manovich likens the prototypical American novel to the computer game (28).

sheep, and lubber grasshoppers, Trembling Aspens, Tamarack Pines, and Snowberries. "I'm sooooo from these uplands, Hailey roars, "From corries and chines. / From the freezelloss and slowwash / slushgushing out of basins / and brooks to miles of / Northern Rock Jasmine growing" (H35). At this stage, Hailey and Sam are territorialized.

This sense of territorialization changes when they build up speed and start traveling the world together. Then, the national setting goes over into transnational movement. Their movements across the globe, seemingly without purpose, could be mistaken for those of a playful user of the Google Earth software with its 'smooth zoom effects'. One minute they soar above the earth's surface and see the world pass by with an impassionate eye ("agony / of all I skitter by so easily," S41). The next moment they cross through a city street, locally immersed but still 'unassailable'. Their narration performs a series of scalar expansions and contractions: an effortless 'zapping' from the extremely distant to the intimately close, from national to local, the particular to the general. Sam and Hailey seem to be in full control over their movements across the globe because, as they claim, they know no boundaries. They acknowledge neither laws nor restraints: "I will sacrifice nothing. For there are no conflicts. Except me. And there's only one transgression. Me" (H3). Their global travels are seemingly without borders: "I will sacrifice nothing. For there are no countries. Except me. And there is only one boundary. Me" (S3). Their adventures on the road read like a utopia, a fairytale of unbridled transnationalism. The whole world serves as a geospatial database for their trajectory:

Amortized. Fueled. Ready to pour it on. / Our new 911
Cabriolet, nelly, natch to lay / a batch from St. Louis.
Budapest, Santiago, / Warsaw. Amsterdam, Shanghai,
New Delhi. / Lisbon. Every city. Roam. Air sharper. /
Promises harder. Driving US from the ages. (H216)

Displaced from the specificity of their original space and location, they come "screaming on from some / transcontinental territory" (H227). The transnational here stands for freedom: it promises acts of deterritorialization, disconnection from the nation state.

Yet, these transnational wanderings are still inscribed in the national, American framework. Ironically, the couple's dreams of detachment and autonomy firmly ground these characters in American traditions. Like Vollmann (and arguably LeClair) they are tied to their geographical origins in their dreams of transcending the nation. Sam and Hailey are stereotypically, indeed archetypically American in their repeated insistence on "the Dream" ("Everyone betrays the Dream but who cares for it?" H360). In their shared story of escape from their particular

socio-historical contexts and through perpetual motion,¹⁸² they are trans-historical personifications of the country that claims to remain 'forever young': "Allmighty sixteen and so freeeeee" (S1).¹⁸³ The American framing of their adventure is underwritten by their referring to themselves as US. Their Dream is to be continuously reborn through travel. Leslie Fiedler describes the American author in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), as "forever beginning," and his country as "a nation sustained by a sentimental and Romantic dream, the dream of an escape from culture and a renewal of youth" (xix; xxxiii).¹⁸⁴ The circular structure of their navigable Möbius-space allows Sam and Hailey both: a perpetual re-beginning and to be forever sixteen. Their belief in their ability to relocate and begin ever anew ties them to two characteristics of their home country that I have also identified in Vollmann's wanderings: *restlessness* ("Where there's a wheel, there's a way. / And we're always awaying" (S225) and *rootlessness* ("always we will leave US / behind US," H290).

Hailey and Sam attempt to reinvent themselves through travel-as-narration. In the juxtaposition of their monologues, identities are presented as fluid: the male goes over into the female, and historically specific details are playfully transformed from one story-half to another. Their automobile, for example, is a different brand and model each time they mention it. As archetypes, Sam and Hailey seem to be above and beyond such material and historical concerns. Like Da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, they are placed at first firmly at the center of their respective idiosyncratic worlds. This sense of control over the world they inhabit includes these characters' own identities. Unlike Vollmann's narrator in *TA*, who remains trapped in his outward appearance and American perspective, the outlaws in *OR* are able to rewrite their own identities at will. Such acts of self-invention offer the illusion of total control: of

182 The constant motion of their travels is reflected in the repeated inclusion of a symbol of two vertical lines resembling the 'pause' icon on for instance a DVD or a computer program. The same symbol is inserted into certain words, such as "Allways" and "Allone". When you see this pause-icon, it means the program is running. Sam and Hailey, this icon seems to suggest, are literally running 'non-stop': "We're big engines without brakes" (H217).

183 Pressman notes that this age has symbolic value: sixteen is the age when American youth receive "the quintessential sign of American freedom—a driver's license" (2014: 163).

184 This perpetual re-beginning comes with an unwillingness to settle that for Fiedler explains why long-term romantic attachment is an uneasy subject for American authors, who avoid the topic of marriage at all cost (xx). This could explain Danielewski's choice for two sixteen-year-olds as central characters. Sam defines marriage poetically as "... Where / Love accepting Liberty's end / secures Love's undoing" (S20). Halfway through, however, these teenagers do get married. As Pressman notes (2014: 164), this causes a shift in the novel's tone, conveying a sense of confinement: "The Wheel his no more / We're stuck" (H 312).

homo autotelus, or modern, self-generating man, who is completely self-contained (Eagleton 1990: 64). This myth of creative imagination ex nihilo is entangled with the idea of freedom in Western history (Buck-Morss 1992: 8). Thus, Sam and Hailey mythologize themselves and become larger than life as mythical figures. They evade the world beyond their concerns: their respective worlds begin and end with their own bodies and minds. Perfectly self-enclosed, their self-images are of a system without an outside: "I'm unavoidable. No beneath / underneath. No over / above. Just one side" (SH30); "I'm the all. The all available / Ever now. Ever here. / Allways unavailable" (S27). They are not *of* the world; they *are* the world.

Yet, this by no means makes them 'disembodied master subjects' who are able to perceive "everything from nowhere" (Haraway 1991: 189). Even if they blow themselves up out of all proportions, Sam and Hailey cannot escape from their idiosyncratic viewpoints. This sense of limited focalization is underwritten by the book's color coding. In Hailey's half of the book zeroes and the character 'o' are synaesthetically printed in gold; in Sam's half they are printed in green, signifying the colors of their eyes, respectively: "gold eyes with flecks of green" (S7) and "green eyes with flecks of gold" (H7). Their outlook on the world is literally 'colored,' we see their worlds, through their eyes. The effect of this strategy of focalization is one of scale variance. This complex entanglement between what is depicted and the scale of representation also corresponds to a variance in font sizes. The book's typographical composition visually performs the characters' development: both voices are at first displayed in a large font, with lots of short 'sound-bites' and exclamations, creating a 'loud' look:

I jump free this wheel.
On fire. Blaze a breeze.
I'll devastate the World.
No big deal. New mutiny all
around. With a twist.
With a smile. A frown.
Allmighty sixteen and so freeeeee. (S1)

When they go on the road and put their flight into motion, they are able to gradually broaden this narrow viewpoint to include the other. Corresponding to this development, their statements are gradually compressed to a smaller amount of longer, more reflective lines in a tiny font, like a whisper:

And I, your sentry of ice, shall always protect
what your Joy so terrifyingly elects.
I'll destroy no World

so long as it keeps turning with scurry & blush,
fledgling & charms beading with dews,
and allways our rush returning renewed.
Everyone betrays the Dream
but who cares for it? O Sam no,
I could never walk away from you. (H360)

This typographical invention allows for a visual-material presentation of scale variance: the youngster's egos expand and contract as their view of the other changes. By extension, their world changes. The evolving and expanding scales of the text point to a book-world that is always in flux. Contrary to the Googlized view of the globe as a fixed, 'fetishized' object, *OR*, true to its title, presents us with a world under continuous transformation.

4.3.2 "Chasing US through the [p]ages": history and worldliness in *Only Revolutions*

We want to be chained in history, but we also want to be unlinked via an escape character (in programming: a backslash, quote sign, comment tag, and so on) that allows us the freedom to be a link unto ourselves or to whom and what we choose.

— Alan Liu, *Local Transcendence*¹⁸⁵

Danielewski's attention to scale variance, like Vollmann's, already nuances the claim to 'mastery' that might be expected from such a masterfully constructed novel. The outlaw couple's romantic dream of escape-through-narration and full control over their worlds is further shattered by the role of time and history in *OR*. For Hailey's and Sam's freedom and sense of control are not unconditional. The outside world, culture, and history are at their heels at every turn, questioning their self-proclaimed rootlessness and limitlessness. At times, the emphasis is on (active) escape ("Driving US *from* the ages," H216; emphasis mine); at other times they rather seem hunted, passive ("Chasing US *to* our ages," S216; emphasis mine). They have to stay in motion to steer clear of the lasso of time: "Yes, maybe it's time to move on. / Spare some our hurt before / the World retakes what we always / elude when we run" (H209). Their joyride is a flight from a history that forces them to live in two separate worlds. To stand still would mean to be pinned down at different points on the Möbius strip, to be tied to one's historical and

185 (2008: 328)

geographical contexts.¹⁸⁶ Hence, they do not remain in perpetual motion because they are free: they have to keep moving to *remain* free. This freedom turning into its opposite is another familiar trope in American literature: “The enemy of society on the run toward freedom is also the pariah in flight from his guilt, the guilt of that very flight” (Fiedler xxi). Sam and Hailey are forced to keep moving as they are enclosed in an immanent world. They flee from their guilt of evading the world.

Whether they succeed in retaining their freedom, depends on the reader’s perspective. Even in dreams of a transnational utopia, as we have seen repeatedly throughout this chapter, the national perspective is not easy to elude. Whereas *OR*’s characters do, in a superficial sense, transcend the spatial and temporal grid that demarcates their nation-state, that grid does not stop existing simply because they ignore it. One of the ways in which the national impinges on the global and vice versa, is found in the ‘chronomosaics’. These are columns of historical fragments placed in the inner margins of each page that list events. These are dated from November 22, 1863, to May 29, 2005, with blank entries continuing thereafter until January 19, 2063.¹⁸⁷ The timelines reduce the events to non-causal, paratactic enumerations: “Yokohama quake & wave, / 3,000 go” (S118). The dated lists of events resemble a minimalist newspaper, a form that makes comparisons possible across different territorial scales. Like a newspaper, the timeline presents the world to the nation in a way that enforces a global simultaneity and discursive standardization—the local and the foreign are written about in the same way and inscribed in the same daily temporal cycle (Anderson 1998: 2). Thus, in the chronomosaics, the ‘outside’ world is inscribed in the pages of Sam and Hailey’s lives. It is, literally, marginalized on the page, suggesting the

186 This undecidability between freedom and boundedness once again echoes the story of the exiled Amalfitano in *2666*, who in a sense is also forced to keep moving in order to retain his ‘freedom’. In that novel, Bolaño gives a fitting image for this paradoxical situation: a ‘magic disk’ with the bars of a prison cell printed on one side, and a laughing “little old drunk” on the other (2008: 334). Spinning the magic disk, images linger on our retina, making the criminal appear behind bars. The little drunk, then, is captive and free, dependent upon the viewer’s perception. The same principle is operative in *OR*: whether Sam and Hailey are free or tied down depends on the reader’s preferred way of reading. In both novels, flight and stasis are revealed as two sides of the same coin.

187 These historical events have been collected by the author who placed a call on his “MZD Forums” (<<http://markzdanielewski.info/onlyrev.htm>>) in August 2005, for his fans to submit the historical moments they would want to see mentioned in the book to come. He also asked them for their favorite automobiles, plants, and animals to be included in the manuscript. As the author explains his choice for these elements of reader participation: “it’s not just my personal history, but histories that go beyond what I can perceive when I’m looking at thousands of books” (qtd. in Benzon). This example of what Jenkins calls ‘participatory culture’ (2006) is yet another way to implicate the reader in the production of the book and make the monumental novel more inclusive.

couple's self-absorption and evasion of worldly matters.¹⁸⁸

Yet, the historical and the worldly threaten to catch up with the outlaw couple at every turn. At several points, details from the 'gutters' of history find their way into their text. Their clothing, for instance, is always period-appropriate, as Hailey describes Sam as wearing "silk tie, suspenders and loafers" (H197), while he sees her in "dome hat, bloomers and flats" (S197). When Sam's page bears the dateline "Nov 19 1945" he sees Hailey receiving five- and ten-dollar bills—"Lincolns and Hamiltons" (S197)—whereas Hailey's page is "March 18 1987" and she sees Sam pocketing fifties and hundreds, "Jacksons and Grants" (H197). This differentialization of contextual details creates a pervasive, ominous sense that the external world is on the verge of impinging upon the lovers' shared world. In spite of their efforts to attain a mythical non-temporality and non-spatiality through interminable autotelic self-narration, Hailey and Sam are thus confronted with the relentless linearity of the chronological archive. The perfection of their closed circle is interrupted by the interference of these temporal and 'openended' lines, injecting historical consciousness into the world they created.¹⁸⁹ With these hints at historical consciousness, the world seeps in, or rather, exposes itself as always already *their* world: pursued by time, they are worldly, *of* the world.

In *OR*, the notion of being chased by time is personified in the figure of the 'Creep,' a villain that emerges repeatedly at the exact same points in the chiasmic structure. The name of this creep, who pursues Sam and Hailey with a lasso (another loop), is consistently printed in a purple font, as are the dates of the chronomosaics. This color coding hints at his character as the embodiment of time and history in the novel: "—Fools. I'm your salvation / Without me you both lose. You'll slip away and never find a role. Time's up. Time to tie you down. Now." (S275). At that point of the narrative, indeed, time would be 'running out' were we reading a linear novel, judged by the number of pages left. Luckily for

188 The point on the axis formed by pages 80-81, when the lovers momentarily merge on the page, coincides with particularly eventful dates: 1943 for Sam (WWII, Stalingrad) and 1984 for Hailey. These traumatic events precisely coincide with the place where they momentarily dissolve into each other, and are oblivious of the rest of the world. They are aware of this evasion that is reminiscent of (American) exceptionalism (Kilgore 2010: 188): "only we can easily escape. Because we're unpunishable" (S224). "Circumstantially, Sam yields. *We're irresponsible.* / —Me: *irresponsible.* / —US: *irresponsible.*" (H258).

189 The reader might note that these dual temporalities correspond to the two interlinked dimensions of monumentality that I discussed in chapter one. Historical monumentality is represented by the timelines in *OR*; Sam and Hailey's shared, mythical time is the circular temporality of aesthetic monumentality, of 'grand effects' (or, as in Bolaño's nightmare of history, terrible events) from the past that can be repeated in the present. This mythical understanding of history comes back in the omnipresent circles in *OR*, and makes Sam and Hailey larger-than-life American archetypes who deem themselves unassailable by history.

Sam and Hailey, the Creep's lasso is not wide enough to capture them both, and they manage to get away. Still, they are never unpursued, since the Creep just has to wait on the opposite page of the chiasmic structure. The characters always find the creep of time waiting on the other side of the book's chiasmic space: hence, as he announces, "You can never leave me" (S274).

In addition to its combined meanings of 'scary' and 'stealthily approaching' (as in old age 'creeping up on' someone), 'creep' is also a term in book design, referring to a situation when the bulk of paper gets particularly large, extending the duration of the act of flipping through a book. Drucker suggests that in book art, this 'creep' of the pages can be employed strategically to concretize time, to render it tangible and perceptible "as a literal and spatial feature of the book" (1997: 100). This is exactly what Danielewski does. He concretizes (story-)time not so much through the bulk of his carefully crafted work, but rather through his use of small font, his juxtaposition of different blocks of text on one page and the unconventional instructions for handling the book. The Creep is then the structural-fictional embodiment of these manipulations of reading time in *OR*.

When we focus on his role of antagonist in the story, this ominous figure for historical time puts Sam and Hailey's brash assertions of their freedom and transcendence in another light. Inhabiting separate universes that are, moreover, perfectly enclosed in their creator's circular composition, the protagonists are trapped inside the book as a bounded space, like 'Vollmann' in his atlas. Sam and Hailey at times seem to be curiously aware of the book's materiality as something that literally stands between them. When their voices become one for a moment, exactly one page before the axis of the chiasmic space, they feel "something wide which feels close. / Open but feels closed. Lying weirdly / across US. Between US. Where we're / closest, where we touch, where we're one. / Somehow continuing on separately" (179). The characters could here very well be feeling the book that contains them and comprises their world. What lies between them at this point is one page: a space to be traversed. That this is the closest the two are ever going to get gives a materialist spin to an otherwise classic, idealist story of love and unification.

4.3.3 'Open, yet closed': a non-totalizable totality

So far I have laid out how Danielewski emphasizes the unique affordances of the book-bound novel, exploiting the book's volumetric properties and material characteristics in order to perform experiences of inhabiting a world of late globalization that is characterized by a radical immanence. Sam and Hailey traverse the globe at great speed to remain out of the grip of time—and, by extension, that of worldly matters. But as we have seen, their success is only partial, depending on the perspective from

Nancy's term for a dynamic whole that is not completed or given, yet at the same time without remainder: "[n]othing is lacking in the world: the world is the totality, and the totality completes itself as the open, as the nontotalization of the open" (1997: 152). As a non-totalizable totality, *OR* is "[o]pen[,] but feels closed" (SH 179). There is no 'outside the book,' the book is a world whose *here* is not opposed to a *there* but articulates all possible beings-there (Nancy 1997: 78). And yet, the reader is invited into this book-space, asked to lend her *hands* to steer the road trip, as well as her *data* to fill in the stories. Without its reader, *OR* is incomplete. Openness of form is also created by the open-ended nature of the marginalized timelines and, significantly, by Danielewski's choice to leave open the chronomosaics set after the date of publishing. In all these respects, the circle is never conclusively closed, because world-forming is never finished: it is a process in expansion.

The motto printed on both ends of the book, 'You were there,' once again announces an inclusive monumentality. Besides pointing to the way that Sam and Hailey are bound together in each singular opening of the book, this epigraph emphasizes the involvement of the reader who traverses the text, and whose physical work keeps the journey going. *OR*'s feedback loop absorbs the reader into the narrative system and thus makes her part of this space of globality *within the book*. Danielewski's fans, delivering crowd-sourced content as part of a multimedia participatory culture, are implicated too. Besides referring to the United States and to Sam and Hailey's romantic 'democracy of two,' there emerges a third possible meaning of US: a global being-in-common. In the end, this option is not excluded from the textual universe of *OR*, but rather lingers as a question that we can project on the timelines for the future that the author has purposefully left open.

Conclusion

If the world is a book, every book is the world . . . there is no longer a limit of reference. The world and the book eternally and infinitely send back their reflected images.

—Blanchot, *The Book to Come*¹⁹¹

At the outset of this chapter, I asked how monumental novels could encapsulate a global scope without reinscribing global power imbalances. Can novels with totalizing ambitions avoid totalization in an ideological sense? I can now, based on my readings of Vollmann's *TA* and Danielewski's *OR*, answer in the affirmative. I have identified many

191 (2003: 94)

similarities between works. As I have shown, both present the reader with characters' attempts at escape through digressive movement and narration in a world without a beyond. Both are symmetrical structures with shifting centers: unlike the satellite photography of GIS-systems, these novels present a world in flux. The contemporary remake of a Burkean artificial infinite is in both these novels configured as a circular structure, as a being-encapsulated (which ties in with Nancy's assessment of a global lack of an 'outside'). The characters inhabiting these book-spaces wander around without the promise of transcending their material confinements. Significantly, in both *TA* and *OR* the characters are aware of being contained in the material book.

Both novels imply themselves in an American mythology of the global, but also subtend this mythology by problematizing it. They exploit familiar tropes like the American Dream, dreams of rebirth through traveling, and rootlessness. They subvert these cultural archetypes by revealing how 'the American' is framed by traditions and myths that tie it to its own geographical and national context. Rather than propagating freedom or autonomy, these characters fail at 'rewriting' the self through travel. Instead, *OR* and *TA* insist on the importance of perspectivism and scale as determinate for any world-view. In both cases, the book has mastery over its owner, the travelling narrator, instead of the other way around.

Yet, there are also important differences between *TA* and *OR* that cannot be glossed over. An important difference lies in the extent to which the writers are present in their work. By posing as the lone wanderer, Vollmann does not take sufficient distance to his work's retro-artistic aspect of archiving the female and celebrating open space. Thus, he implicates himself in problematic acts of mastery. While his work is open about this dynamic, it also makes him liable to regressive thinking. *OR*, in contrast, includes a level of meta-reflection on the same processes of totalization and mastery. I have argued that this novel implicates the reader by making her choose between a globally responsible and a romantically evasive reading method. In their own way, these novels emphasize the fact that authors and readers cannot remain at a distance from these networks of influence, indeed perpetuate them. Problems of global responsibility are made part and parcel of processes of writing and reading.

Danielewski and Vollmann, it has become clear, use the materiality of the book to remind us of this limited character of focalization and the impossibility of attaining objective perspectives on a world that we, as observers, are ourselves part of. They perform this sense of immanence by trapping their drifting, freedom-seeking characters in the book. They subvert the idea of the book-as-world into the world-as-book (or container into contained) in their innovative use of the volumetric and spatial characteristics of the codex. This way, they reveal

the unattainability and deficiency of LeClair's ideal of the novel that 'captures' a global ecosystem. In both cases, the narratives are critically encompassed, bounded, and framed by a set of 'American' values and outlooks on the world. This nuances the idea of rootlessness and the related connotations of freedom and autonomy attached to the cultural identity of the American (by LeClair, but also by Deleuze and Parnet). By foregrounding the inescapability of a limited, subjective perspective on the world, Danielewski's and Vollmann's acts of world-forming go against the idea, pervasive in data visualizations, of the globe as an already totalized entity available to the panoptic gaze of a viewer.

Unlike the 'abstract unitotality' of globalization, they create story-worlds that maintain a referential relation to the horizons of our concrete world. Moreover, they do not attempt to cover up asymmetrical power relations between the US and the rest of the world. Unlike Google's smooth zoom aesthetics, Danielewski and Vollmann do not sanitize their worlds of the problems and messiness of our concrete global situation. Thus, they steer clear of the pitfalls of representing the global in terms of Apter's claustrophobic 'oneworldedness,' "enshrin[ing] paranoia as the preferred trope of national allegory" and "export[ing] a singularly American style of one-world thinking" (2006: 385-86). The authors posit multiply scalar worlds by composing their narratives according to a strategy of 'scale variance'. In the absence of alternative worlds, I have argued with Nancy, we need these creative acts of world-forming to counteract the uniform worldwideness of globalization. That Danielewski and Vollmann do not provide conclusive answers with respect to this project suggests that world-forming as a creative act is never fulfilled. Never closed off, the book-as-world-as-book is a non-totalizable totality.

In many respects, Nancy's notion of a non-totalizable totality is an apt way to describe the project of today's monumental novel as a whole. After all, in the course of the present study, we have been brought back to a certain duality in this project time and again. On the one hand, these novels harbor the ambition of infinite expansion; on the other, there is the signature of the author and the binding of the book. On the one hand there is digression and interminable narration, on the other hand there is totalization. On the one hand comprehension, on the other apprehension, counting (1+1+1). On the one hand the cyclical or circular, on the other, the linear: history, the archive.

A combination of these different temporalities and variant scales in these authors' creations of the world in *TA* and *OR*, amounts to an attempt to reimagine relationality. These novels might 'only' be aesthetic forms, and whatever relations they imagine can only be speculative approximations of the 'real' connections that constitute our world. But as Nancy insists, such (re)imaginings are vital for the possibility of a transnational collectivity to become visible. To make global connections

possible, we need literature and art as intermediate forms through which these relations can become imaginable. We need world images that can compete with oneworldedness and with 'objective' datafications, with schemes that figure the globe as an already totalized entity that awaits us for perception.

This pressing task for literature and art explains the investment and continuous reinvestment in what Derrida, in *Paper Machine* (2005) describes as

the book project, in the book of the world or the world book, in the absolute book (this is why I also described the end of the book as interminable or endless), the new space of writing and reading in electronic writing, traveling at top speed from one spot on the globe to another, and linking together, beyond frontiers and copyrights, not only citizens of the world on the universal network of a potential *universitas*, but also any reader as a writer, potential or virtual or whatever. (15)

In the novels I discussed in this chapter, such an inclusive paper space is imagined within the form of the book. In these world-creations by Vollmann and Danielewski the book object becomes a spatialized metaphor for our experiences of worldliness under the influence of globalization. This, in my view, is what makes the book-bound novel such a fitting receptacle for imaginative reflections on global relations: it performs this experience of a space that is self-enclosed and simultaneously exceeds all representations. These authors reinvent the book as, on the one hand, a space to escape in, and, on the other, a space that is impossible to escape from. Book-bound monumental novels can thus constitute an inclusive sphere of reference in which they implicate their readers in innovative ways, thus rethinking our expanding relations to the world and to others on a variety of scales.

Conclusion

The end is in the beginning and yet you go on.

—Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*¹⁹²

This study started from the hypothesis that the novel survives in the present by reinventing itself as monumental in a dialogue with new media and technology (digitalization, big data, quantification), and with the ethical challenges of globalization. In the introduction, I presented my rationale for analyzing the works of Bolaño, Knausgård, Vollmann, and Danielewski through the lens of monumentality as a critical concept. I asked how these literary objects fit into a larger technocultural development of increasing interest in the topic of size and scale in the humanities and social sciences. In addition I questioned how these novels' material dimensions and their expansive scope relate to their workings as vehicles of cultural memory, their commemorative dimension of preserving the novel, literature, or the book for future generations.

The key theoretical concept of monumentality proved particularly fruitful for this investigation, since it allowed us to think together notions of bigness and lasting greatness with an emphasis on commemorative value. In addition, the term captures a certain retro-artistic dimension that I identified in these writers' works, as it bears resonances of belatedness, militarism, and masculinity. My initial working definition established that a literary monumentality resides first in material characteristics of quantity (size, bulk, length or weight), which then metonymically transfers to scope and themes, and often implies a value judgment as well. In the monumental, commemoration and veneration come together. Applied to the novel, monumentality entails both literature's capacity to transmit historicity and the ability of novels to

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achieve artistic greatness in their own right, assuring their proliferation. Furthermore, Jean Paul's definition of the monument as a work of art on a work of art (1836) allowed me to identify its underlying tautology. The novel as monument, I tentatively concluded, is intended as a bulwark against *its own death*, a monument to the novel itself.

In the absence of an existing theory, I proposed to investigate this literary monumentality today in a comparative framework of its original context of emergence in the nineteenth century. In order to reflect on the ways the novel currently adapts to socio-cultural and technological changes and reinvents itself, I established three outstanding points of congruence between these twenty-first century novelistic strategies and effects, and nineteenth-century monumentality. First, that the monumental gains in importance against a background of changes in culture and media. Second, the double-take on history underlying monumentality. Finally and third, the way artist and work are joined together in the monument. I argued that a foregrounding of the novel's monumental potential in the works under study can be read analogously to nineteenth-century monumentality, in the face of transformations in the media-landscape (e.g. tweets, anxieties about attention spans, databases, and telling-as-counting), and the shift toward a globalized, 'networked' world. I concluded that the monumental novel, as in the nineteenth century, stems from a desire for cultural permanence in the face of rapid social and technological change.

Adaptation and innovation

After having constructed this contrastive framework, in my analyses in the second, third, and fourth chapters I was able to prove that even (or especially) when in manifest opposition to these social and technological transformations of digitalization, datafication, and globalization, the novels I studied are marked by their profound influence. The monumental novel and the human subject as portrayed by it are both suspended between the 'narrative' wish for motivations and causality, and the database's embodiment of an illegible number of entries that can be recombined almost endlessly. Often, this resulted in a tension between a would-be 'all-encompassing' presentation on the one hand, and the recurrence of forgetting, fragments, and gaps on the other.

My analyses also brought to light an ongoing accommodation of a dispersed, fragmented, and episodic narrativity in archival and database structures in literature. The novels I studied are marked by a quantitative mode of narrating-as-counting in which causality and closure make way for seriality. They perform a situation of data overload which challenges the reader to construe patterns of meaning. The syntagm or narrative becomes secondary and implicit in these monumental novels: the plot emerges only when the reader, as the living equivalent of an algorithm, searches for patterns and meaningful connections in the mass of details.

As with big data analyses, we must accept that there is no causal, overarching narrative: indeed, these authors leave it to the reader to distinguish between the meaningful and meaningless.

In line with this shift from narrative to database, the works under study signal a transformation of characters' selfhood. When it comes to their representations of human subjectivity, we have seen that these novels gesture towards a self-understanding that is serial or episodic rather than narrative or diachronic (Strawson 2004). They give voice to a subjectivity that is not necessarily continuous and does not build or fixate its identity through chronological, causal relations or associations. Rather, they present human life in terms of discontinuous 'selves' that simply follow one another. The pervasiveness of such serial and episodic self-representations, I have noted, indicates a shift that runs parallel to the shift in dominance from narrative to database. When we become progressively less 'narrative' and more paratactic in our self-understanding, this leads in turn to a transformation of human subjectivity. The monumental novel experiments with such alternative modes of representing subjective experience.

Under the influence of a larger constellation of digitalization and globalization, I have argued, representational strategies in novels like these are becoming more inclusive and encompassing in their recording ambitions. Through interminability, lists, and the anaphoric singulative, and a general drive to preserve as much as possible of the past and the present without compression, monumental literature explodes the genre from which the writing sets out. For example, my reading of 2666's list of victims demonstrated that when memorial structures in the database narrative exceed a certain volume, this results in a hollowing out of referentiality. Such an engulfing structure does not allow for a 'presenting' of victims but, in its overwhelming effects of absence, symbolically succeeds in memorializing far more encompassing groups and events. Likewise, *My Struggle*, in its inclusion of an excess of trivial details, breaks the mold of the autobiographical novel and monumentalizes its readers as well, who identify with the exhibitionist posture. We are all implicated in the monumental scope of these novels. Lastly, *The Atlas* and *Only Revolutions*, investigate the global implications of such inclusivity by performing the experience of containment in an immanent world (with no 'outside' or 'beyond' to which we can escape) in the material form of the (world-as-)book. Through these and other transformations in its modes of representation, we have seen how the novel adapts to the socio-cultural and technological structures surrounding it, and thus transgresses itself.

Old media and old ideas

Unidirectional influence of 'the new' on the novel, however, was not all that my thesis set out to determine. I announced from the outset

that quantitative and serial forms in literature are neither new nor unprecedented. My study built on the premise that the strategies of scale, seriality, and quantification at work in these novels should be placed in their proper media-historical tradition, and understood as reinventions of older forms. Thus, I demonstrated how the current 'database aesthetics' in 'analog' novels like *2666* that results from narrative's increasing incorporation in database structures is rooted in an eighteenth-century aesthetic of the mathematical and Romantic sublime that revolves around excess, absence, and expendability. Moreover, we have seen that 'telling' in its meaning of 'counting' becomes newly relevant due to the operations of digital and serial media, yet was already a dominant of representation in the annals and chronicles of the late middle ages. Last, in their attention to book materiality and the spatial features of the codex that goes back to the art of illuminated manuscripts, Vollmann and Danielewski revisit and reverse the age-old trope of the book-as-world. In accordance with the Janus-faced logic of the monumental, these authors remind us of, and revalue, these older aesthetic strategies and traditions by thus incorporating 'the new'. By situating the recent emphasis on size and scale in literary culture in its proper (literary and media) history, this research has laid bare patterns of recurrence in a larger media genealogy. This corrects a prevailing logic of technological determinism or obsolescence.

As we have seen, monumentality in contemporary literature not only revisits older practices of representation. It also rehearses certain long-discarded Romantic ideas. I have noted, for instance, how the (self-)representation of these authors ties in with a view of writing as a masculine, heroic and risky activity. I identified the funerary monument as an important trope, which explains the emphasis on suffering and sacrifice in the biographies of Bolaño, Knausgård, and Vollmann. My analyses of their works repeatedly came back to themes (and formal expressions) of longing for unity and transcendence, *Sehnsucht*, and an anachronistic sense of faith in the power of literature to produce 'everlasting' greatness. Neoromantic tendencies also surfaced in these authors' 'archival' representations of women as a quest to preserve otherness, which I linked to the tradition of *das Ewig-Weibliche* (Goethe 1808). These authors, I argued, practice an 'eternal feminine' that lacks the compression of symbolic representations, resulting in an interminable structure of gender essentialism without an essence. It needs to be said that they vary in the degree to which they employ these pervasive themes in seriousness. At one end stands Bolaño, who can be said to take an ironic stance to such Romantic ideals (even if he keeps coming back to them). At the other extreme we find Vollmann, who, as I argued, does not take enough distance to his alter ego's objectification of women around the world. The recurrence of these retro-critical and masculinist themes and tendencies in contemporary literature serves as

a reminder for literary scholars to remain vigilant of regressions in art and thinking, especially in a hyper-connected, global, and digital era where simplification and essentialism could all too readily be perceived as comforting.

Defamiliarizing the new: critical reflections

Besides adapting to current technocultural developments and thus revisiting and reevaluating its own past, I argued that the monumental novel adds a level of reflection on, and critical investigation of, these transformations in media and cultural practices. I here reiterate the following points on which the monumental novel poses a critical stance to contemporary developments in media and society: (1) the waning of exactitude in big data analysis; (2) a problematic relinquishment of causality; (3) the dream of total recall and the 'Googlization' of memory (Van Dijck 2005); (4) the positivist ideology that informs datafication; (5) the uniform 'world-wideness' or sameness that globalization imposes upon the globe; and last, (6) monumentalization itself as a response to global connectivity.

(1) A locus for critical reflection that we can discern in the corpus, is the necessity of distance and inexactitude in 'big data' as an approach to knowledge-gathering. Thus I argued that the narration of *2666* reflected at times the outcome of big data mining and foregrounded the way big data enables us to collect more information than ever before. This, however, did not bring us any closer to the objects of narration, its characters, or 'what really happened'. Fittingly, despite, or rather *because* of the vast bodies of information at the narrator's disposal, the resulting record of events was remarkably 'distant,' marked by gaps that were filled by conjecture and speculation. This demonstrates how more data do not necessarily bring us closer to the 'real'. In *2666*, the opposite is the case. Thus, the seemingly omniscient narratorial instance defamiliarizes the drive to collect every last parcel of information. The datafication of 'everything,' *My Struggle* also brought to the fore, often leads to a depletion of meaning.

(2) Not only is exactitude forfeited with big and 'messy' datasets: causality as well is losing its importance in Western culture. The quantitative and serial representations characteristic of digital media, it has been established, cannot answer the 'why?'-question that is central to narrative. In "The Part About the Crimes", the database of victims could not 'solve' Santa Teresa's crime rate, and detectives and reader alike were left in the dark as to the complex networks of causal relations that contributed to the femicides. This serves as an important reminder that we need narratives in order to make sense of data. Media theorists like Ernst and Manovich typically view the waning influence of narrative causality as a positive development. Others (e.g. Anderson 2008) go even further and claim that numerical values bring us closer to reality.

The novels I have studied take a more critical and nuanced stance by presenting us with the consequences of such a relaxation of the causal drive. With the question 'why?', a possible determination of the meaning of a phenomenon is foreclosed.

(3) Despite their unwillingness to select and compress, we have seen, moreover, that these novels do not adhere to the "Googlization of memory" (Van Dijck 2005: 323), the popular idea that forgetfulness can and should be cured through technology. Knausgård's autobiographical writing, I have argued, implicitly opposes digital media's dream of 'total recall' and the idea of recollection as an unchanging mental storehouse of readily retrievable memories. Instead, *My Struggle* envisions memory as a creative act of (re)construction through writing that is dynamic rather than static. More in line with cultural memory studies, these texts present recollection as an ongoing and changeable process in which memories are configured anew each time in the present. The sense of subjectivity that emanates from this temporal process is malleable: the meaning of the past changes along with the 'I'. Thus, the monumental novel imparts the important reminder that gaps and absences between past selves are not 'bugs' to be technologically overcome, but rather they imbue memory with meaning.

(4) In addition, I have clarified that the built-in delay of prose writing, marked by digression and regression, provides the monumental novel with a productive counterpoint to the positivism, apparent immediacy, and instantaneity underlying the 'N=all' approach of big data scientists, as well as their belief in the objective power of numbers to reflect reality. As a slower mode of recording, monumental writing defamiliarizes and questions the desirability of seemingly immediate digital mediation. Its form poses a resistance to this perceived immediacy and simultaneity, by foregrounding mediacy as opposed to the transparency of data, and delay as opposed to the simultaneity of online recording.

(5) Unique opportunities for critical reflection on globalization and digitalization can also be found in the materiality of the novel itself. This is especially true for Vollmann's and Danielewski's inventions of new material forms for literature. As I have argued, these acts of world-forming counteract and posit alternatives to the uniformity or 'oneworldedness' (Apter 2003) imposed by globalization. In this respect, I contrasted these works to Geographic Information Systems (GIS), such as the Google Earth software, whose maps are too often thought to somehow conflate with the 'real' territory they only represent. Operating from a narrative strategy of scale variance, these novels, by contrast, oscillate between close and distant readings of the world. They comment on global situations in a meaningful way while resisting the self-enclosed and all-encompassing forms that postmodernist critics discarded decades ago. They also resist the the conflation between representation and reality that characterizes today's media-culture

informed by datafication. In this respect, I have characterized these works as 'non-totalizable totalities'. We have seen how *The Atlas* and *Only Revolutions* overtly implicate themselves in national traditions of literature and myth-making of which they are critical, but which they do not pretend to transcend. Thus, the monumental novel has proved able to create literary worlds that maintain a referential relation to the horizons of our concrete world without covering up asymmetrical power relations. It is able to perform these worlds materially, by incorporating the medium-specific properties of the book in a meaningful way.

(6) Last, and perhaps most pressing, under the influence of digital media, network culture and globalization, we are progressively confronted with the interconnectivity of "every particle and wave" (Vesna 2007: 35). This point is of especial import as we have increasingly more decontextualized units of information at our disposal than ever before, and might be more aware than ever of connectivity. At the same time, it is becoming harder to divine causal relations: the relations binding people and events in different parts of the world are so encompassing and complex as to be obscured. We cannot see the forest because of the trees. In this respect, I have argued that Bolaño's *2666* contains a warning against the monumentalization of both the 'great' (e.g. the monumental author) and the 'terrible' (e.g. the serial killer) that updates Nietzsche's critique of monumentalism in his *Untimely Meditations*. All such acts of monumentalization, my analysis established, are in the final instance acts of binding in the face of overload, when synthesis is in fact impossible to attain. Monumentality is an answer to the unease that the sublime of data overload evokes, and it can lead to the eternal return of less-than-productive neoromantic attitudes. Insofar as they make its mechanisms visible, these novels dismantle the logic of monumentality from within.

I have listed these six points of critical evaluation within the monumental novel here, in order to stress once more the important fact that novels do more than adapt and transform the genre in the face of cultural changes. They reflect on, and critique, these same developments in technology and society that cause the novel's transformations, and therein lies an important part of the genre's power and continued relevance.

What the novel has to offer

In the introduction to this thesis I defended my focus on the novel as an object of study by claiming that the genre is able to stress its own uniqueness and difference with respect to the engulfing flow of information in society, and thus to underscore its own ability to differentiate between the meaningful and the meaningless. I here summarize the most important ways in which my corpus has proven to succeed in this respect: hybridity, slowness, mediacy, and materiality.

As I have claimed at the outset of this dissertation, the novel is a unique genre of writing, not only because of its ability to adapt, but also for its hybridity and its ability to combine heterogeneous organizing principles and codes. This has perhaps come to the fore most clearly in Bolaño's "The Part About the Crimes," where database structures were filled in with micro-narratives. As I argued, this oscillation between the two modes of representation allowed for a contrasting reading between literature and new media, as they mutually revealed their gaps and blind spots. The combination generated insights into their potential as well as their limits when it comes to representing a complex reality. Both failed in ordering the data of Santa Teresa's horrific crimes, but they failed in specific, informative ways. The database allowed for an open-ended, nonhierarchical presentation of vast numbers of elements, but it did not lend signification to this seemingly infinite list, limited as it was to the 'what,' or the sequential correlations between elements. Narrative is needed to invest the database's logic with human meaning and interpretation, and allows us to consider the unknown, that which has not yet been fully classified. Yet narrative, with its encompassing structure of beginning, middle, and end, cannot encompass the true scope of global events. The monumental novel offers a unique combination of these two modes of representation, generating a productive tension that enabled me to reflect on their strengths and pitfalls as ways of ordering the world.

Besides hybridity, I claimed that the novel's contribution to the current media-scape lies in its 'slowness' and potential for reflection. In addition to incorporating quantitative strategies of representation, as noted, the monumental novel imparts an awareness of writing as a time-consuming, digressive, and regressive mode of recording that continuously lags behind our experience of life. As a consequence of this delay, the temporalities of reading and living become entangled, and this lack of separation between life and oeuvre creates a sense of hyperrealism. But reading, in the case of such digressive texts, also becomes a 'slow reading'. The reader has to plow through the novels in the linearity of the codex. Such works emphasize writing and reading as time-consuming processes in which synchronicity the time frames of reading/writing and living is impossible. Thus, the authors make us aware of the medium's formal particularities, instead of trying to make them transparent or seamless. The distance of mediacy thus emphasized opens up an in-between space for reflection that gives meaning to the world depicted, and brings the 'why?'-question back in representation. Thus arises the possibility of attending to the 'qualitative' in addition to the quantitative self. The monumental novel, I concluded, harbors a potential counterforce to the teleology and positivism that surround the advent of datafication: a promise of pleasure and reflection (often by way of frustration and boredom) in societies that privilege directness,

speed, and immediacy. This promotion of the slowness of reading as a form of labor can be understood as part of counter-movements such as the 'cult of the craft,' that

rises up in a post-digital revolt that privileges physical presence over virtual presence, touch over sight and sound, poor media over rich media . . . Such phenomena as the revival of knitting subcultures, the rise of a cottage industry of chapbook publishers, steampunk fabrication, makers fairs, even the Slow Food movement, were once confined to cities such as San Francisco and London, but are now spreading virally. (Burdick et al. 2012: 8)

We should, however, be careful not to think too strictly in terms of an opposition between digital culture and these 'retro' practices. As one of the main presuppositions of my thesis went, these divergent trends of 'old' and 'new' should be understood as complexly intertwined, indeed as bringing forth each other (see also Espi 2015).

Last, the novels of Danielewski and Vollmann add another level to the monumental novel's emphasis on its own contribution to the current media ecology by foregrounding their book-bound materiality. As Drucker (1997) has repeatedly reminded us, the book's structural boundedness and the discreteness of the page allow for all kinds of creative manipulations that generate meaning in a manner unachievable in the theoretically infinite web page and electronic document. The book-bound novel is a particularly fitting receptacle for imaginative reflections on digital networks and global relations, because of its volumetric aspect, its three-dimensional, spatial affordances, as well as its finite character and linearity of narrative. It performs an experience of a space that is self-enclosed and simultaneously exceeds all representations. The book is both a material and a conceptual space, and in novels like *The Atlas* and *Only Revolutions*, the two levels meaningfully intersect. The material book thus functions as a container of story-worlds and is at the same time contained by these worlds. Book-bound monumental novels thus harbor the potential to constitute an inclusive sphere and implicate their readers in innovative ways. On all these accounts, monumental novels revalue and reevaluate the distinctive potentialities of the book-bound novel in a dialectical relation with the evolving present life-world.

Further research

Instead of presenting a broad range of instances of the monumental in contemporary literature (as recently, Ercolino has done in *The Maximalist Novel*) I have chosen to probe deeply into a limited number of texts. This choice was informed by my wish to underscore the importance of

close reading, especially in times of big data when correlation is often valued over signification. As has become clear, the novels I selected are complex in their constructions (they are, for instance, characterized by a close entanglement between form and content). To opt for a more general listing of their monumental characteristics would inevitably have led me to remain at the surface level of analysis. My goal, to offer a qualitative reading of these quantitative transformations in the novel, urged me to restrict myself and engage in an act of selection that is perhaps unbefitting this study's subject. Insofar as my thesis provides an instrument to approach these cultural transformations, it could facilitate the analysis of an expandable repertoire of big books and novels inspired by digitalization in the years to come.

Because of its selective scope, my study of monumental novels has by no means been exhaustive or inclusive in terms of its corpus. In the course of my research, new novels and book projects have seen the light of day, and research into these new objects will undoubtedly enrich and expand the thesis I have constructed so far. As I mentioned before, Danielewski has recently embarked on the creation of a 27-part (and 21.000-page) novel series, *The Familiar*, the first installment of which (the 880-page *One Rainy Day in May*, 2015) has now been published.¹⁹³ I expect that the serial novel, as an innovative form that is losing its long-standing connotation of 'low-brow' culture, will gain in import in the years to come, under the influence of sophisticated forms like narratively complex TV-series and the new prestige of graphic novels and computer games.¹⁹⁴ More studies need to be carried out to analyze this renewed relevance of the serial, which is yet another in a series of 'comebacks' (in this case of the nineteenth-century serialized novel or *feuilleton*, see Law 2000; Mussell 2012).

In addition, it would be fruitful to expand the scope of the present study into monumentalism by including artistic projects of 'big books' and 'endless texts' that stretch and enlarge the spatial-material form of the codex to the point of illegibility. Richard Grossman's ongoing project *Breeze Avenue* is such a 'novel' that the artist plans to expand to a three-million-page length; Yahaya Baruwa's projected *Struggles of a Dreamer*, the 'world's largest published novel,' measures 8 ft. 5 x 5 ft. 5 x 11 ft. These

193 A new volume is scheduled for publication every six months. Whether this series will ever see conclusion, is dependent upon the response of Danielewski's readership. In that respect, the serialized novel is more akin to serialized television, than to the single-volume novel (*The Familiar* even features textual 'trailers' at the beginning of each volume).

194 On the complexity of television serials: see Mittell 2006; on the graphic novel: see Baetens and Frey 2014; on serial logic as embedded in the software of computer games: see Denson, 2011; Denson and Jahn-Sudmann 2014; on the serial in social media and blogging: see Rettberg 2014; on the former association of serials with 'low' culture such as soap operas and genre fiction: see Hayward 1997.

projects are so extreme in terms of size and length that they frustrate 'readability'. Reading thus becomes increasingly an anticipatory and speculative activity. These examples indicate that under the influence of big data and serial media, books and novels are in a process of expansion, extending either *between* their covers, *beyond* the covers by becoming serial, or stretching and exploding the covers altogether (in the case of book artists' material disintegration of the spatial codex). How do these expansive transformations affect reading pace and temporal experience of the unfolding of the narrative threads? What new forms of attention will these new literary objects compel? What practices of reading will they inspire?

Last, scholars of literature and media would do well to investigate how these transformations of reading can be expected to change the *social function* of the novel and inspire the formation of new forms of readerly collectivity. How do these new textual forms and ways of reading reinvent literature as a social experience, something to discuss communally (both at online forums and in 'real life')? How do such serials and book objects tap into new media's potential for 'participatory culture' (Jenkins 2006) by letting the reader co-decide what the next volume will contain and how the story arcs will develop? These are some of the question that will occupy me in the years to follow.

Living on, finally

The secret demand of art . . . is always . . . the surprise of what is, without being possible, the surprise of what must begin at every extreme, the work of the end of the world, art that finds its beginning only where there is no more art and where its conditions are lacking

—Blanchot, *The Book to Come*¹⁹⁵

Remaining in the sphere of the monumental, I wish to zoom out and round the circle of my argument in the present thesis by ending with a general note on the topic with which I began: the death of the novel. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, the novel's death is infinitely forestalled in its particular manner of co-evolving in interaction with a larger media ecology. This is how the novel survives: it lives on by simply *being there*. For Derrida (2011), writing always revolves around survival. It is an act of inscription and the subsequent persistence of the inscribed trace beyond its author, in an interval that enables recurrence and signification:

195 (2003: 107)

the meaning of [survival] is not to be added on to living and dying. It is originary: life is living on, life is survival [*la vie est survie*]. To survive in the usual sense of the term means to continue to live, but also to live after death. When it comes to translating such a notion, Benjamin emphasizes the distinction between *überleben* on the one hand, surviving death, like a book that survives the death of its author, or a child the death of its parents, and, on the other hand, *fortleben*, living on, continuing to live. (2007: 26)

The novel's living on as if 'after its own end' has always been its very way of living—a living beyond its death or a detour from and onto death, a survival from death. To phrase it in the terms of another philosopher who has proven invaluable for the present study: the novel's proliferation beyond its demise, again and again, is simply an occurrence, the wonder '*dass es geschieht*' (Lyotard 1991: 90). The continuous apocalypse of the novel is in the final instance an assertion of its power, since it reflects nothing else than the terror of privation:

the possibility of nothing happening, of words, colours, forms or sounds not coming; of this sentence being the last, of bread not coming daily. This is the misery that the painter faces with a plastic surface, of the musician with the acoustic surface, the misery the thinker faces with a desert of thought, and so on. Not only faced with the empty canvas or the empty page, at the 'beginning' of the work, but every time something has to be waited for, and thus forms a question at every point of questioning [*point d'interrogation*] at every 'and what now?' (1991: 91-2)

The monumental is what follows the nothingness, now.

Samenvatting

Monumentale romans in tijden van globalisering en digitalisering

Ondanks voorspellingen van het ‘einde van het boek’ en de ‘dood van de roman’ onder invloed van digitalisering in de jaren tachtig en negentig, zijn innovatieve kunstenaars en auteurs zich de laatste decennia juist gaan richten op de mogelijkheden van de analoge materialiteit van het boek. *Zine-makers*, book artists en schrijvers van hybride en monumentale romans onderzoeken wat speciaal is aan het boek in contrast met het scherm en vinden zo het literaire opnieuw uit. In het onderzoeksproject ‘Back to the Book’ onderzochten Professor Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, Sara Rosa Espi en ik deze werken vanuit een idee van media-divergentie, een complexe en dynamische interactie van media die wordt gekenmerkt door materiële diversiteit. Digitale media, zo stellen we, wissen analoge literatuur niet uit, maar produceren die literatuur opnieuw. Binnen dit project richtte ik me op de monumentale roman als één manier waarop literatuur hervormd en opnieuw gedacht wordt. Deze dissertatie is de uitkomst van een onderzoek naar monumentaliteit in de romans van Roberto Bolaño, Karl Ove Knausgård, William T. Vollmann en Mark Z. Danielewski.

Het vertrekpunt voor mijn onderzoek is de vermeende ‘dood van de roman’. De afgelopen decennia waren er veel negatieve geluiden te horen over het voortbestaan van de literaire roman. Schrijvers zoals Philip Roth beweerden dat boeken het qua populariteit moeten afleggen tegen televisie en het internet. Critici zoals Nicholas Carr en Maryanne Wolf verzuchtten dat het overschot aan tekstuele en visuele fragmenten waaraan we dagelijks blootgesteld worden in onze digitale cultuur, ervoor zorgt dat onze aandachtspanne te kort wordt om lange, complexe verhalen te omvatten. De schrijver V.S. Naipaul vond dat de roman niet langer kan antwoorden aan de hedendaagse politieke context van globalisering: de roman is te klein en gevormd, de wereld te complex.

En toch werden er in diezelfde decennia niet alleen onverminderd romans geschreven en gepubliceerd, maar vielen veel van die

boeken juist op door hun uitzonderlijke omvang. Schrijvers zoals de Amerikanen Vollmann (1959-) en Danielewski (1966-), de Chileen Bolaño (1953-2003) en de Noor Knausgård (1968-) legden zich toe op teksten van duizenden pagina's en schijnbaar eindeloze boekenseries. Zulke monumentale romans lijken een anachronisme na Jean-François Lyotard's aankondiging van het einde van de Grote Verhalen in 1984. Hoe duiden we deze toewijding aan dikke boeken en lange verhalen, deze ambitie om een oud medium te transformeren tot ongeëvenaarde omvang en reikwijdte, juist op het moment dat men de dood van dit medium voorspelde?

Om deze vraag te kunnen beantwoorden, is het ten eerste belangrijk om te benadrukken dat we aan die voorspellingen van het einde van de roman niet teveel gewicht moeten hangen. De dood van de roman is al zo oud als die roman zelf, en werd uitgeroepen met elke technologische en maatschappelijke verandering: van krant en grammofoon tot TV en internet. De roman vindt zichzelf steeds opnieuw uit door zich aan te passen aan die veranderingen, en leeft zo voorbij zijn eigen dood. De Westerse techno-sociale context vandaag, gekenmerkt door globalisering, digitalisering en de opkomst van big data, vormt hierop geen uitzondering. In deze dissertatie betoog ik dat de roman deze transformaties 'overleeft' door zich enerzijds aan te passen aan deze ontwikkelingen, en anderzijds de eigen, medium-specifieke eigenschappen te benadrukken. In mijn studie laat ik zien hoe de romans van Bolaño, Knausgård, Vollmann en Danielewski zo reageren op hedendaagse technologische transformaties en de ethische uitdagingen van globalisering.

Eerst poneer ik een definitie van monumentaliteit die noties van volume en blijvende grootsheid combineert met een nadruk op herinneringswaarde. Effecten van monumentaliteit hangen direct samen met materiele eigenschappen: de omvang, massa, lengte en het gewicht van deze romans maken ze 'gewichtig' in figuurlijke zin, en onderschrijven onmiddellijk en zintuiglijk hun literaire status. Maar hoe verhouden de materiële omvang en de thematische reikwijdte van deze romans zich tot hun status als cultureel erfgoed? Een moeilijkheid bij het theoretiseren van de monumentale roman is dat de term veelvuldig wordt rondgestrooid maar zelden toegelicht. 'Monumentaal' is al tijden een modewoord in de literaire kritiek, maar wordt zelden gedefinieerd. Ik geef een theoretische invulling aan die term, waarin beide betekenissen van het monumentale samenkomen: zowel omvang (volume, thematische reikwijdte) als de drang om te preserven. Tegen de onmiddellijkheid en vluchtigheid van de hedendaagse mediacultuur boort het monumentale in de roman een verlangen aan naar het langdurige, het meesterwerk, de toekomstige klassieker. Maar de oppositie is slechts een schijnbare. Monumentaliteit is nauw verweven met nieuwe culturele vormen zoals de database en bijbehorende mogelijkheden op het gebied van kwantiteit en schaal.

Dat 'analoge' literatuur verandert onder de invloed van digitalisering betekent overigens niet dat de kwantitatieve en seriële vormen in deze romans helemaal nieuw zijn. Monumentale romans maken gebruik van formele procedés en structurele principes zoals lijsten, de anafoor singulatieve frequentie (waar wat n keer gebeurt, ook n keer verteld wordt zonder compressie), totalisering, uitweiding en regressie. Deze strategieën zijn niet nieuw, maar krijgen een nieuwe urgentie in een context van globalisering en digitalisering. Mijn studie gaat uit van de premisse dat de monumentale strategieën van deze romans in een media-historische traditie moeten worden geplaatst. De seriële roman is een continuering van de negentiende-eeuwse *feuilletonroman*; de zogeheten 'database esthetiek' gaat voort op laatmiddeleeuwse annalen en kronieken en het achttiende-eeuwse sublieme. De hernieuwde aandacht voor de materialiteit van het boek en de ruimtelijke eigenschappen van de codex in de werken van Vollmann en Danielewski voert terug op de kunst van geïllumineerde manuscripten en de visueel-tekstuele innovaties door auteurs zoals William Blake en Stéphane Mallarmé. Monumentale romans incorporeren 'het nieuwe,' maar herinneren ons tegelijkertijd aan oudere esthetische strategieën, die op deze manier geherwaardeerd worden. De monumentale roman reflecteert zo op wat behouden moet blijven aan het literaire door archaische vertelpraktijken actueel te maken in een dialoog met nieuwe media.

Anders dan in de muziekwetenschap, architectuur, *memory studies* en kunstgeschiedenis, bestaat er in de literatuurwetenschap geen theorie over monumentaliteit. Daarom ga ik in het eerste hoofdstuk te rade bij de oorspronkelijke context waarin het monument op grote schaal opkwam: het Europa van de negentiende eeuw. In die context hielpen monumenten de opkomende natiestaten om een eigen identiteit te definiëren. Het monument garandeerde culturele duurzaamheid te midden van de ingrijpende maatschappelijke en technologische veranderingen die de opkomst van moderne steden met zich meebracht.

De romans van Vollmann, Danielewski, Knausgård en Bolaño, zo betoog ik, symptomatiseren een vergelijkbaar verlangen naar duurzaamheid te midden van culturele transformaties. De monumentale roman verkoopt 'het nieuwe' (bijv. de kwantitatieve ordeningsprincipes van de database), maar speelt tegelijkertijd in op een nostalgisch verlangen naar de klassieker in een cultureel klimaat waarin de komst van nieuwe 'klassiekers' als onzeker ervaren wordt. De roman wordt zo als monument ingezet tegen zijn eigen dood, een monument voor de roman zelf. In dat eerste hoofdstuk identificeer ik daarom drie punten van overeenkomst tussen deze eenentwintigste-eeuwse monumentale romans en de negentiende-eeuwse monumentaliteit. Ten eerste: monumentaliteit komt op tegen een achtergrond van veranderingen in cultuur en media. Ten tweede: een duale temporaliteit (deels lineair en 'historisch', deels circulair en 'esthetisch') ligt ten

grondslag aan het monumentale. Ten derde: de artiest of auteur en het oeuvre worden samengebracht in het monument. Naast grootsheid en preservering draagt monumentaliteit ook neoromantische connotaties van zelfopoffering, militarisme en masculiniteit (denk aan termen als ‘meesterwerk’). Ik heb ervoor gekozen deze genderdimensie niet te neutraliseren door geforceerd een vrouwelijke auteur aan mijn cases toe te voegen. Ik erken de masculiene codering van monumentaliteit als onderdeel van mijn kritische lezing van deze romans. Dit eerste hoofdstuk legt het grondwerk voor mijn analyses van de cases in de rest van deze studie en biedt een kader waarin de monumentale romans geplaatst kunnen worden.

In een tweede hoofdstuk breng ik de eerste transformatie in kaart die de monumentale eigenschappen van de hedendaagse roman inspireert: de overgang van narratief naar database. Ik stel dat narratief en database niet in competitie zijn, maar elkaar wederzijds beïnvloeden en inspireren. Hoewel de zogeheten ‘database esthetiek’ in de analoge roman meestal wordt beschouwd als een recente ontwikkeling, demonstreer ik hoe deze geworteld is in een achttiende-eeuwse traditie van het mathematische en Romantische sublieme—een esthetiek die draait om overschot, afwezigheid, en uitbreidbaarheid. Dit hoofdstuk laat zien hoe het sublieme zichzelf vandaag de dag codeert in de monumentale roman als een esthetiek van *data overload*. Wat zegt dit sublieme van *data overload* over de relatie tussen narratief en database als concurrerende manieren om de wereld te ordenen? Welke representatiestrategieën staan de romanschrijver ter beschikking nu ‘vertellen’ steeds vaker begrepen wordt als ‘tellen’? Deze vragen beantwoord ik op basis van een analyse van Roberto Bolaño’s *2666* (2004). Ik laat zien dat de huidige manifestatie van het sublieme als *data overload* verregaande consequenties heeft voor het idee van de roman als monument. Kan de monumentale roman fungeren als een gedenkteken voor hen die worden uitgebuit en uitgewist, wanneer in die roman de ordeningsprincipes van het archief het overnemen van narratief (zoals het geval is in Bolaño’s *2666*, waar meer dan honderd slachtoffers van femicide zijn ‘vereeuwigd’)?

Hoofdstuk drie beschouwt hedendaagse ontwikkelingen van *big data* en trends van *datafication* en *Quantified Self*, vanuit de vraag hoe deze onze persoonlijke herinneringen, zelf-representaties en, uiteindelijk, zelfbegrip beïnvloeden. Ik analyseer Knausgård’s autobiografische romanserie *Mijn Strijd* in een vergelijkend kader van huidige trends in zelfrepresentatie in nieuwe media en op sociale netwerksites. Hoe positioneert deze monumentale en seriële autobiografie zich ten opzichte van de nieuwe mogelijkheden voor zelf(re)presentatie geboden door *tracking apps*, *Quantified Self* en sociale media? Tegen Knausgård’s anti-mediahouding en Romantische idealen in, onderzoek ik hoe zijn werk nauw verbonden is met technologieën van zelfrepresentatie en zelfexpressie—zoals selfies, *time lapse* video’s, blogs en geautomatiseerde

dagboeken. Ik stel dat de autobiografische roman zichzelf opnieuw uitvindt als monumentaal door de seriële en archivale strategieën van zelfrepresentatie te incorporeren die kenmerkend zijn voor digitale media. Door middel van kwantificering en serialiteit breekt Knausgård de narratieve mal en transcendeert hij de subjectieve reikwijdte van autobiografie. Zo monumentaliseert hij het zelf en het alledaagse.

Naast de overeenkomsten onderzoekt dit derde hoofdstuk ook de verschillen tussen de autobiografische roman en nieuwe media. Wat voegt de vorm van de roman toe aan deze digitale media? Ik laat zien dat *Mijn Strijd* een verzet belichaamt tegen neigingen naar positivisme, gelijktijdigheid en onmiddellijkheid. Schrijven wordt hier gepresenteerd als een tijdrovende vorm van representatie die constant achter de ervaring aanhobbelt. De lezer moet zich door deze romans heen ploegen in het lineaire stramien van de codex: *slow reading*. Die vertraging opent een ruimte tussen het 'ik' dat beleeft en het 'ik' dat schrijft: een ruimte die ons in staat stelt te reflecteren op het alledaagse. Die ruimte brengt als het ware de 'waarom'-vraag terug in de representatie. De monumentale roman draagt een potentiële tegenkracht tegen de teleologie en het positivisme omtrent de opkomst van *datafication*: een belofte van plezier en reflectie (vaak via frustratie en verveling) in samenlevingen waar directheid, snelheid en onmiddellijkheid prevaleren.

Het vierde en laatste hoofdstuk reflecteert op literaire representaties van de wereld in tijden van (late) globalisering. Aan de ene kant is de wereld subliem onrepresenteerbaar, omdat die in zijn onmetelijkheid elke mogelijke representatie overtreft. Aan de andere kant wordt de wereld kleiner dankzij netwerkmedia en globalisering. Hoe kunnen monumentale romans de wereld verbeelden, zonder ten prooi te vallen aan de ideologische valkuilen van 'totaliserende' representaties? In dit hoofdstuk analyseer ik William T. Vollmann's *The Atlas* (1996) en Mark Z. Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* (2006). Mijn theoretisch kader voor dit laatste hoofdstuk borduurt voort op Jean-Luc Nancy's notie van *mondialisation* of wereld-vorming (2007). *Mondialisation* gaat in tegen globalisering als een onderdrukkende, homogeniserende kracht, en behelst een 'creatie' van de wereld via imaginatieve reflectie op alternatieve mogelijke vormen voor de globe.

In hun experimentele zoektocht naar nieuwe materiële vormen voor literatuur als manier om te reflecteren op onze relaties tot de wereld, zo stel ik, dragen Vollmann en Danielewski bij aan dit project van wereld-vorming. Dergelijke creatieve projecten bieden een alternatief op de eenvormigheid (Emily Apter's 'oneworldedness') die globalisering oplegt aan culturele productie. Volgens een narratieve strategie van schaalvariatie oscilleren deze romans tussen *close* en *distant readings* van de wereld. In dat opzicht contrasteer ik ze met Geographic Information Systems (GIS) zoals Google Earth. Deze systemen zijn gekenmerkt door een schijnbare transparantie, waardoor vaak verondersteld wordt dat de

kaarten samenvallen met het territorium dat ze representeren. In hun artistieke pogingen om 'de wereld' te omvatten in hun werken, gebruiken Danielewski en Vollmann de medium-specifieke eigenschappen van de analoge roman op innovatieve wijzen. Zo zijn ze in staat het gevoel van insluiting over te brengen dat we ervaren naarmate de wereld 'globaal' wordt. Het boekobject wordt een ruimtelijke metafoor voor onze ervaringen van wereldsheid. Dit vierde hoofdstuk demonstreert hoe monumentale werken in staat zijn wereldse situaties op een kritische manier te representeren, zonder hun eigen betrokkenheid in deze situaties te ontkennen.

Uit mijn analyses van deze uiteenlopende facetten van de hedendaagse monumentale roman concludeer ik dat monumentaliteit één van de meest belangrijke manieren is waarop literatuur hervormd en opnieuw gedacht wordt in een wisselwerking met het huidige medialandschap. De buitengewone omvang is hier een direct gevolg van de drang om te preservareren: de monumentale roman is tegelijkertijd een monument. De roman overleeft door zich aan te passen aan sociale en technologische transformaties, en biedt ons ook de nodige ruimte voor reflectie op culturele transformaties. Zo leeft de roman zoals altijd voort voorbij zijn eigen houdbaarheidsdatum.

Curriculum Vitae

Inge van de Ven is a postdoctoral researcher at Education for Learning Societies, Utrecht University, and a lecturer and tutor in the department of Comparative Literature. She holds a research master's degree (cum laude) in Literary Studies from Utrecht University. From 2011 to 2015 she worked as a doctoral researcher in the NWO-funded VIDI project Back to the Book, supervised by Prof. dr. Kiene Brillenburg Wurth. Inge has lectured on literature and cinema, intermediality, literary theory, the philosophy of art, close and distant reading, big books, and narratology. Her work has been published in journals like *European Journal of English Studies*, *Frame*, *Vooy*, and *Ramsj!*, as well as several edited volumes. In 2013 she was a visiting researcher at Harvard University.

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